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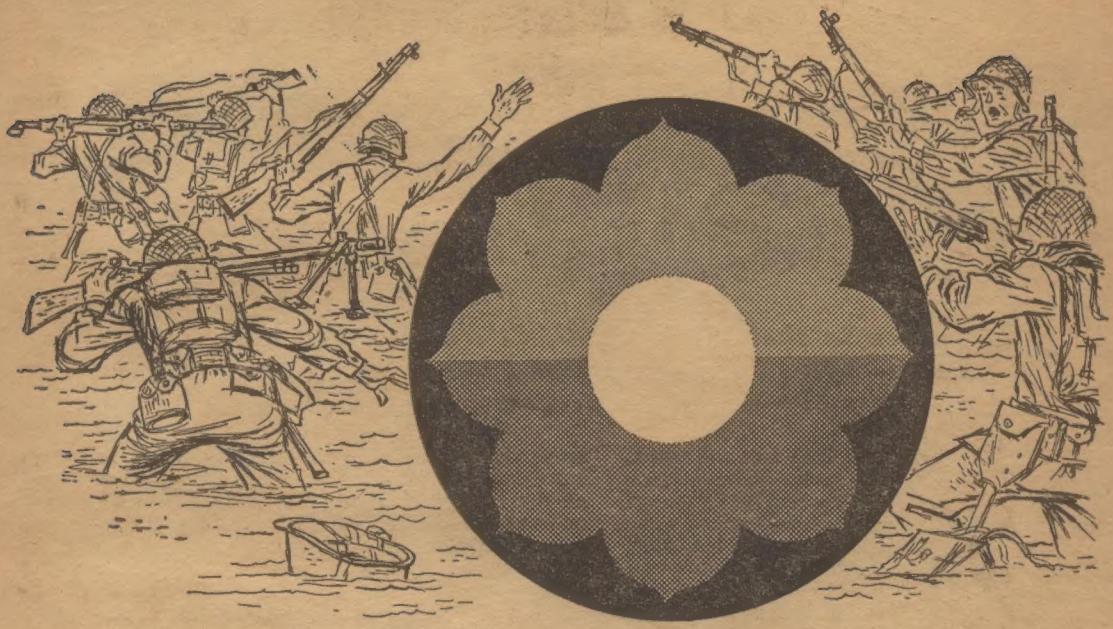
Only real men can wear it



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ON THE TRAIL

Justice in the Old West didn't always stand on ceremony . . . she often found her boots off the ground—under the nearest cottonwood!

WESTERN stories, both fact and fiction, are filled with such expressions as "Judge Lynch," "Judge Colt," "miners' courts" and "vigilance committees"—all of which were bound up with frontier justice, but which at times have been the subject of some misapprehension.

Miners' courts and vigilance committees of early California, for instance, were not angry mobs seeking revenge, but orderly organized bodies for the protection of society. They disobeyed the law in order to enforce it. When a frontier town or mining camp became crime-ridden, the law-abiding citizens took charge of affairs.

When brutal murder was committed, a citizens' court, sometime called a vigilance committee, was organized. It was composed of the best and most law-abiding people in the community. A judge and a prosecuting attorney were appointed, and the criminal was allowed an attorney for his defense.

Witnesses were sworn and the case conducted like legal trials of today, except that lawyers were not permitted the use of technicalities, evasions, pleas for new trials, or pleas of insanity. The arguments were usually limited to a half hour or an hour on each side. There were no long drawn-out trials. They were finished in one day, which included the hanging and the burial of the murderer when adjudged guilty.

The most noted uprising of citizens in the history of California was that of the great vigilance committee of 1856 at San Francisco. There had been an orgy of crime in full swing. The judges were corrupt, the sharp-practice lawyers secured acquittals on almost any false plea, and murders and robberies were so numerous that neither life nor property was safe.

An independent jouralist, James King, editor of the *Bulletin*, undertook to reform the city, and met the usual reformer's fate. He was assassinated by James P. Casey, an ex-convict from New York. This was the match to the powder magazine.

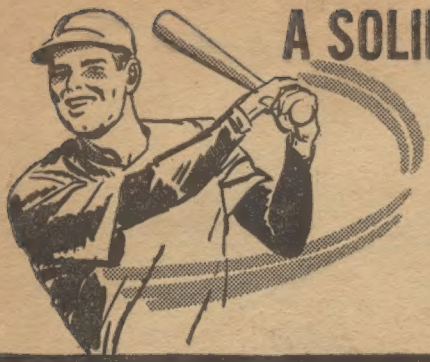
The people organized into a vigilance committee, which included almost every business man in the city. The number was estimated at ten thousand. The murderer was rushed to the county jail for protection. But when King died, a few days after the shooting, the committee stormed the jail and hanged Casey just as the funeral procession was passing a few blocks distant.

At the same time they hanged one Cora, who had murdered United States Marshal Richardson. Cora had been in jail several months, and his girl friend had paid a criminal lawyer five thousand dollars to save his neck. The lawyer had delayed matters by the usual false pleas, so the citizens settled the case by the noose.

A miners' court differed very little from a citizens or vigilance committee, except that the miners' court system existed as long as the mining district was occupied. Every man in the district was a member except lawyers, gamblers and saloon-keepers. The lawyers were objected to on the grounds that they defended men who were known to be criminals, resorted to "tricks," and were always looking for a fee.

But a lawyer was permitted to defend a criminal—if the criminal so desired. Usually, however, the criminal selected a miner to defend him, knowing the prejudice against at-

(Continued on page 130)



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"Come hell or high water —only one of us will ride home from Wichita!"

ROLL 'EM NORTH TO *Hell!*

By M. HOWARD LANE

A crumpled heap of old clothes stirred, half in and half out of the water, and Carrigan left his saddle in a long leap. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Shake Hands With Satan

LUKE CARRIGAN wiped dust and sweat from his mahogany red face, and stared at the notched tally stick in his hand. He shook his head, and the disappointment in him was like a physical sickness. He glanced at Llano Jones, riding beside him, and his old *segundo* was a hunched caricature of a man staring almost unseeingly at the longhorn herd bunched on the shelf above the thread of the San Antonio River.

"Look at 'em," Llano said tonelessly. "There's a year's work, Luke. Some of them damned mavericks are so old they'll

drop daid before we ever get 'em to Santone. Most of the rest are so cussed thin they could jump right through the eye of a needle without scraping their ribs. Fifteen hundred of 'em, and I promised you twenty-five. I still cain't figger why them blackjack thickets upstream didn't produce more strays."

"It's all right," Carrigan said, the words rasping his throat. "We'll sell this bunch, pay off the *vaqueros*—"

"And the Crossed C will be wuss off than when you came back from the war, and found your dad had left you nothin' but a trunk-full of Confederate shinplasters to show for the stuff we drove to New Orleans to feed you gents in Gray."

Carrigan nodded, and his mind went back to that day in '66 when he'd ridden home to the Crossed C, to face ruin. Rundown buildings, and a grave beneath an oak to mark the last resting place of his father. Only Llano Jones had stuck to the ranch. Llano was an old-timer who remembered the Crossed C when she'd been riding high.

"A smart young feller would hear north out of Texas, Luke," Llano had told him grimly, "and let the carpetbaggers pick the bones of this spread."

"I ain't that smart," Carrigan had answered. "There was always a heap of strays bustin' off into the blackjack thickets up along the river. They weren't worth chasing in the old days. Now—"

"I can get ye a crew of Mex bushpoppers who'll work for a peso a day and their beans." Llano had brightened considerably. "By the Lord, we'll tally twenty-five hundred before we're done! They're talkin' in Santone of trailin' herds north to Missouri and Kansas, and if the boys tacklin' it have any luck this year they'll be hungry to try again in '68. Mebbe we can get a price for a herd by then, that'll put the Crossed C back on her feet."

He heard the jingle of a bit chain behind him, and didn't bother to turn, figuring it was one of their *vaqueros* riding down from the wing corral where the crew was branding the last few strays.

Then a voice coughed politely, and Carrigan hipped around in his saddle. The rider who had coughed was a stranger, a big man, wearing a white Stetson that was worth fifty dollars of anybody's money. The rest of his garb matched the hat, but Carrigan didn't hold that against him. A fellow had a right to get slicked up when he went visiting. This was the first visitor they'd had in many a month.

THE stranger swung a leg over the horn of his saddle, reached in the pocket of his open vest for tobacco and papers and nodded pleasantly. His teeth were very white behind smiling lips.

"Blackjack Barnes," he introduced himself.

Carrigan answered the man's nod, and he couldn't take his eyes from the makings in the other's hands. He'd run out of tobacco three days before, with no handy place to replenish his supply.

Barnes kneed the black Morgan he was riding up alongside Carrigan. His eyes were dark, sharp. They had noticed the hunger in Carrigan's bony face. He handed over the sack and papers.

"Keep 'em," he said pleasantly. "I got more in my camp up-river."

A camp up-river? That could explain a roundup of fifteen hundred head instead of twenty-five. Carrigan rolled a smoke, his face showing none of his thoughts.

"I'm Luke Carrigan," he said. "Crossed C. This is my ramrod, Llano Jones. Ride back to camp with us. There's beans in the pot, but we ain't got a drink to offer."

"I've got that," the stranger smiled, and brought a pint bottle from his hip pocket.

Llano Jones eyed the bottle, and for the first time his expression thawed.

"Now that's what I call right handsome!" he exclaimed. "You say you're an up-river neighbor?"

Blackjack Barnes nodded. "My boys have rounded about fifteen hundred head out of the canebrakes," he drawled. "Good pickin's. Looks like you've got about the same size bunch."

Carrigan agreed with a brief nod. He wondered again why this hombre had come to pay them a visit. The call wasn't social. Blackjack Barnes was after something.

Llano Jones took a long pull at the bottle, and passed it to Carrigan. The heat of the whiskey was like a bomb exploding in his stomach. Barnes took a drink and grinned.

"Make a man forget home and mother," he said in his drawling, musical voice.

"But not cattle—" said Llano Jones pointedly.

Barnes' face sobered. "That's what I rode over to talk about," he admitted. "Between us we've got about three thousand head."

"Go on," Carrigan said meagerly, but he was suddenly interested in this stranger's talk.

"I took a ride into Santone a couple of weeks ago," Barnes explained, "and learned a heap of interesting news. Sixty-six warn't a very good year for the drovers who trailed north, but last year, sixty-seven, most of 'em made some dinero in Kansas, following that trail a breed named Jess Chisholm blazed down into the Nations. Wichta's the drovers' goal this year, and they claim in Santone that the market's booming up there."

Llano Jones' leathery face was puckered. It was easy for Carrigan to see that his ramrod didn't like this stranger, but he was eager to hear the man out, ready to clutch at any straw.

"Go on," he repeated.

"Most of them Santone drovers have quite a bit of trouble gettin' a herd together," Barnes drawled easily. "Buyin' three-four hundred cattle here, and three-four hundred there. Brands are all different. They got to get bills of sale to prove they own the herds, then spend a heap of time road-brandin' before they can start for the Red."

"Don't sound like so much trouble to me," Llano muttered disparagingly.

Barnes ignored the comment. "Here's what I'm gettin' at, Carrigan," he went on earnestly. "We've got three thousand longhorns between us. I figger if we road-brand 'em, say a C-B, and make one drive to Santone we'll get a heap sight more than if we got it separately. A ready-made herd for some drover to take right over and start trailin' north is going to bring premium dollars. We'll sell in Santone, split the profits, and let some other gent take the risk of losin' his shirt by trailin' north."

"I—" Llano Jones began, but Carrigan cut him short.

"You've got yourself a partner, Barnes," he said, and thrust out his hand. He could see the logic of Blackjack Barnes' proposal, see the chance of boosting the price, maybe enough to compensate for their short tally.

The stranger smiled, and his handclasp was firm. *"Bueno!"* he said explosively. "I'll be rolling in here day after tomorrow, pard."

"Meantime we'll start road-branding," Carrigan said with a sudden grin of his own. "Some of these damned old mossy-horns are goin' to start looking like walking newspapers if they get a few more letters on 'em—"

Barnes handed what was left of the pint to Llano. "Drink hearty, old-timer," he said, and he appeared not to notice that Jones made no attempt to take the hand he extended.

Carrigan watched the man wheel his black and set fancy spurs into the gelding's flanks. Then he looked at Llano, one

of his bushy brows lifting quizzically.

"You don't like the deal?" he challenged.

Llano Jones took a pull at the bottle, then spat reflectively. "Even his whiskey ain't good!" he grunted. "Nope, I don't like the deal, Luke. Skunks are mighty purty, but you don't get close to 'em if you can help it."

But a reckless hope was in Carrigan. "Llano, I'd make a deal with the devil himself if I figgered it'd pull the Crossed C out of the hole."

His ramrod's face puckered. "I ain't so sure but that's just what you've done," he said slowly.

IT WAS hard work, road-branding those three thousand orey-eyed longhorns, and Blackjack Barnes proved himself a good enough hand with a rope to win Llano Jones' grudging admiration. He could enliven an evening with his guitar and singing voice. But Blackjack Barnes wouldn't eat frijoles and he wouldn't associate with Carrigan's brown-skinned crew. That was one of the first things he learned about the partner he'd taken.

Barnes didn't like the *vaqueros* that had been loyal for a year without pay. But the deal was about even, Luke had to admit, because he didn't like the five gun-hung men who made up Barnes's bunch. Neither did Llano Jones.

"We won't be together past Santone," said Carrigan. "I guess we can put up with them till then."

They drove away from the river, and when church towers showed on the horizon Barnes rode alongside Carrigan. "You bed the herd down, pard," he suggested, "and I'll ride on in and mosey around. You find your buyers in the saloons, and you can count on me to strike a hard bargain."

Carrigan's eyes were bullet gray in deep sockets. He looked directly at Barnes. "Seein' as half these cattle are mine," he drawled, "I'd be powerful pleased to have a little hand in the bargainin' myself. You bring your buyers out here, and we'll talk to 'em together."

Barnes' olive face flushed a little. "Why, shore," he answered. "Hell, pard, I wasn't going to try to swing no deal single-handed. But seein' as I'm a little better talker than you—"

"Sometimes a feller can talk too much," Carrigan grunted.

Llano Jones rode up in time to hear the last of the conversation. He watched the stranger ride off toward Santone. "That hombre," he muttered, "can sure figure out ways to beat us on the draw. I could stand a drink myself."

"So could I," Carrigan admitted, "but somebody's got to guard this herd, and keep old Carrillo and Vasquez from cutting some gringo throats."

"Or eating a dose of lead," Llano Jones reminded sourly. "I'll be glad when this deal is finished."

To himself, Carrigan was willing to agree with his ramrod.

The sun was coasting down the westward sky when he saw two riders coming into camp—Barnes and another man. He rode to meet them at his own chuckwagon, and his gray eyes narrowed slightly as he looked over the stranger. Well-barbered, well-dressed, with lips that smiled, and eyes that didn't.

"Shake hands with Jud Brokaw, pard," Barnes said easily. He buys a few herds and holds 'em for drovers makin' ready for the trail."

"I am pleased to meet you," said Jud Brokaw. "Your partner, he tells it right. Yes, I will take the herd off your hands, even if I am stuck with it."

"You don't want to ride out and look 'em over?" Carrigan asked incredulously. He heard Llano drift up beside him, but the old-timer said nothing.

Brokaw was chuckling, reaching for a

black cigar in his vest pocket. "Beef is beef," he said sententiously. A man buys anything on four legs today. It all looks good to those Kansas grangers. Right now I am generous, so I give you five dollars a head for your herd."

Five dollars a head! Carrigan felt the words stab through him with strong pleasure. He hadn't counted on getting much more than three. The market was booming, all right, or Barnes had poured a lot of whiskey down the commission man to put him in a good humor. Then on the other hand, if this herd was worth five to the trader, they might be worth more to a drover.

"Six—" he spoke the single word without changing expression.

Blackjack Barnes reared back in his saddle, his face flushed. "Why you damned—" Then he caught his tongue.

"Six dollars for mangy mavericks right out from the brush?" Jud Brokaw's voice sounded like the squealing of an anguished pig. "Never have I heard of such a thing. I tell you, no! Now I give four, so help me." He turned accusing eyes on Blackjack Barnes. "You say we will have no trouble—"

"We?" Carrigan caught up the word, and his eyes were hard on the men.

Barnes laughed, shakily. "Mr. Brokaw used the word incorrectly," he said in clipped tones. "I told him 'we' meaning you and I would be glad to take five dollars a head, and I still think we should, pard. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, they always say."

"Sometimes they's two birds in the bush," Llano Jones spoke for the first time. "Me, I allus look or the second one afore I shoot the fust."

"Think over six dollars, Mr. Brokaw," Carrigan interjected, and he began to wonder if he'd made a mistake by holding out. Five a head would clear the Crossed C of debt, pay the crew and back taxes even at carpetbag rates, but it wouldn't leave them expense money to start the ranch uphill again.

"I think you talk like a man with a big hole in his head," snapped Brokaw. "Gentlemen, when you want to make sense come and see me."

SILENTLY the three of them watched the buyer spur off toward Santone, and then Barnes faced Carrigan. He was plainly angry and trying to control it.

"It's all right for you to pull a holdout," he said thickly. "That damned greaser crew of yours eats beans, and gets no pay anyway. But each day we have to hold this herd costs me cold cash for my men. I'm ridin' back to town to hunt another buyer, and I suppose I'll have to tell anybody I get a line on that you won't take less than six bucks a head."

"I don't know much about these here commission men," Carrigan's voice was flat, "but I'm shore sartin they're in this buyin' game to make dinero. So if our herd is worth five to Brokaw, he'll sell it to some drover for six or better. If he can do that why can't we?"

Barnes shook his head. "Things jest ain't handled that way around here," he said sullenly. "Ride in and take a look around yourself, if you don't believe me."

"Jest what I figger on doin' after the herd settles down for the night," Carrigan agreed easily.

It was Barnes' turn to ride from camp, but first Carrigan and Llano watched him halt at his own chuckwagon where four of his gun-hung bunch were playing poker on a greasy blanket. Reno Marrs, his *segundo*, rose and swung abroad his saddled mount. He rode out with Barnes.

Llano looked at Carrigan, and his faded blue eyes were glittering. "Ye ever heard of crossin' your fingers, Luke? Well, I got mine crossed, and a six-gun greased in its holster, if ye foller me."

Worry rode into Santone alongside Luke Carrigan that night. He felt the prescience of trouble to come, and wanted none of it.

He racked his dun mount in front of the Drover's Hotel, knowing he might learn more in the bar adjoining the lobby than anywhere else in town. Where his partner might be, he didn't know, and didn't care much. The quicker they were shut of each other the better for both of them.

Warmth and brightness filled the big saloon. Roulette wheels whirred along one wall. Poker tables lay beyond them. The bar was satiny mahogany with many mirrors behind it. Texas men, brokers, buyers, gamblers and carpetbagging politicians made up the crowd that swirled in and out.

Carrigan moved to the bar and a bottle and glass appeared like magic in front of him. "Fust one's always on the house, suh," a grinning bartender in a spotless jacket said. "Looks like you're jest in from the range."

Barkeeps were better than newspapers if a man wanted information, Carrigan knew. The pulse of any town was under their fingertips, for liquor oils tongues, and most of the tenders were men with sharp ears.

"In with a herd to sell," Carrigan said easily. "Hear tell the market's booming."

"Like a skyrocket," the man assented. "Jud Brokaw and some of the rest of them commission men are gettin' rich. So are the trail drivers, if they get through to Kansas. But a feller takes a chance drivin' up the trail. Injuns are out alongside the Nations. They's outlaws makin' a killin' rustling your stock, then sellin' it back to you. You got bad weather to fight, and a heap of rivers to cross afore you hit Wichita. Me, I'll stay here and make mine tendin' bar!"

Carrigan strolled about the room, liking the texture of a rug beneath his feet, the warm feel of good whiskey in his belly.

"Twenty-dollar beef in Wichita," he heard a man say, "but I'd sure hate to risk a drive, after payin' through the nose to get a herd together. Feller can go broke awful fast."

"Or get rich mighty quick," his companion grunted.

Twenty dollars beef in Wichita—an idea wilder than any he'd ever thought of began to roil inside Luke Carrigan.

He didn't notice the man who jostled him until a heavy shoulder knocked him off balance, and a boot heel tramped down agonizingly on his instep. He caught the reek of sour whiskey on the other's breath, and moved instinctively to dislodge the heel grinding his instep. The flat of his left hand was like a ram against the stranger's chest, hurling him backward.

The man was bearded to the eyes. Burly as a teamster, he still wore the garb of a cowman, with twin guns thonged low on his thighs. Carrigan had never seen him before.

"Shove me, will you!" the stranger bellowed. "No damned bush-popper is goin' to push Abe Burrows around."

All the worry and frustration and secret fears that had culminated in Jud Brokaw's visit that afternoon seemed to crystallize all at once in Corrigan.

"You walked on me, friend," he said icily. "Name your game if you don't like the way I play it!"

Burrows started to lurch toward him, and Carrigan felt a heavy hand catch the back of his collar. Another man, big and heavyset, had his hand wrapped in the leather vest Burrows was wearing.

"You're both goin' outside," the one behind Carrigan said dispassionately, "we don't like fightin' in the Drover's."

Carrigan felt himself hustled through the street door. Burrows was pushed out right after him, and he turned, ready for the teamster. "More room here," Carigan said almost pleasantly, and then he

felt a blow catch him over the ear. In the darkness a half dozen men seemed to be around him all at once, raining blows from all sides.

Frame-up? The words formed in his mind. He swung his fists at blurred faces, and felt a hand tug at the holster against his hip. They were trying to disarm him, he realized, and he reached for his Colt. It was his last conscious act, for the boardwalk seemed to rise and smash him full in the face.

One of the Drover's big bouncers was awkwardly swiping at him with a wet bar towel when Carrigan opened his eyes. The man grinned.

"Yuh know," he drawled, "gettin' kilt around here gives the hotel a bad name. 'Sides, me and my pard don't like six to one odds."

"Then there were six of them?" Carrigan asked thickly. His mouth felt full of sawdust.

"Or more," nodded the bouncer. "Why in hades were they jumpin' you, friend?"

Carrigan drew a deep breath. He sat up, cautiously. "I wish I could answer that one," he said softly.

CHAPTER TWO

Ambush

BY THE light of the cook fire, Llano Jones looked Carrigan over and a grin moved beneath his drooping mustache.

"Looks like town didn't agree with you."

Carrigan shook his head carefully. He felt that he'd lose it if he moved quickly. "Had quite a time," he said grimly, and he told his *segundo* of his experiences in Santone.

"You were framed," Llano Jones said positively when he had finished. "But the thing is who done it? Toughs are a dime a dozen, if a gent wants to hire 'em, but what's the idee of tryin' to put you out of the way? Mebbe Brokaw didn't like gettin' turned down this afternoon, but I cain't see him tryin' to kill over it. Barnes, now," he almost hummed the words, "Barnes, now, I dunno."

"The herd is branded CB," Carrigan said flatly. "It takes two signatures on airy bill of sale—"

Llano Jones licked his lips. "Waal, now, figgerin' thataway ought to kinda make me immune to mahem and murder."

"And seeing as you're thirsty," Carrigan grinned lopsidedly, "you're goin' to take up the drinkin' where I left off."

Llano leathered a fresh bronc, and Carrigan watched him ride off toward the beckoning lights. Then he rolled into his blankets beneath the chuckwagon. His body ached in a dozen places, but he guessed he was probably lucky to be alive. Somebody wanted to see him dead—or scared into selling his interest in the CB herd for any price that his partner might name.

"Blackjack don't know me very good," Carrigan thought.

He went to sleep thinking about twenty-dollar beef in Wichita, and awoke when Carrillo, his brown-faced cook, touched him.

"Jefe," he said diffidently, "you sleep late. Your partner, I see heem coming with a *companero*. I think you should know."

"I think so, too," Carrigan tried to grin, but his mouth remembered a fist that had struck the night before, and the coldness inside him had nothing to do with the chilly dawn sun.

He was dressed when Barnes rode in with a small, shifty-eyed man. "Looks like you saw too much of Santone last night, pard," Barnes said after a glance at Carrigan's puffed face.

"Enough," Luke answered briefly, and he wondered where Blackjack Barnes had spent the night. His partner looked as

immaculate as though he'd just stepped from a tailor shop.

"Meet Lew Manton," he invited. "If he likes the looks of our herd, he'll pay six a head."

"If I like 'em," said Manton, and his grin was sour. "Some drovers would say you got too big an outfit to make a drive. Three thousand orey-eyed longhorns is a heap of beef to drive to Wichita, considerin' the risks. Most drovers ain't been trailing more'n two thousand head, but I'm willin' to gamble."

"Let's go take a look," Carrigan said, and he knew that he should feel satisfied at the thought of disposing of the herd for near twice as much as he'd counted on. His share of the sale would start the Crossed C back up the long grade again. He looked at Blackjack Barnes and thought grimly. *Quicker we part company the better.*

Lew Manton looked over the mossyhorn herd. He studied the cows, and estimated how many might drop calves on the trail and slow the drag. Back at the chuckwagon, he said in the same sour tone, "I'll pay you six, but I'm takin' a risk. Meet me at Brokaw's office, and we'll close the deal."

Blackjack Barnes was smiling triumphantly. "Well, pard," he drawled, "I'll give you credit for holding out. You made us a neat piece of change."

I could make a neater piece in Wichita, Carrigan thought.

Aloud he said, "You ride on in with Manton, and get the papers ready to sign. I'll follow you soon as Llano shows up."

Something close to worry came into Barnes' dark eyes. "He been in town all night?"

"Most of it," Carrigan said coolly. "Anything wrong with a gent wettin' his whistle?"

"Oh, hell no!" said Barnes hastily. "Come on, Lew, we'll mosey. Don't keep us waitin' too long, Luke. I got a crew hungry to feel jinglin' money in their jeans."

Luke Carrigan squatted beside Carillo's tiny breakfast fire and drank black coffee. He stared into the coals morosely. He had a crew that wouldn't give a damn if they didn't get paid for another year. Four *vaqueros* and Carrillo, the cook. Enough hands to drive a short herd to Wichita.

"Wish I'd thought of doin' it before I threw in with Barnes," he muttered. But a bargain was a bargain, and he had to admit that Blackjack had lived up to it.

The sound of a rifle rolled over the land. Just one report, somehow ominous in its finality. Carrigan crawled to his feet, peered eastward into the dawn where willows lined the river, a couple miles this side of town. He waited, puzzled, listening for a second shot, and then he saw a horse break over the rim of the trail where it dipped down to the ford. A horse, running wild, without a rider.

Carrigan forked his own saddle, and his fingers loosed the lass-rope at the pommel. Something tight was in his throat. That running horse was a bay—and Llano had ridden a bay into Santone.

The bay snorted and slowed of his own account at Carrigan's approach. A soft word halted the animal, and Carrigan cursed. The bay was Llano's, and the dark stain on the saddle was fresh blood.

CARRIGAN slapped the animal across the rump with his lass-rope, knowing the bay would head for camp as he raced on toward the river. He dipped toward the ford at a gallop, careless of bushwhack lead that might come searching for his own back. A crumpled heap of old clothes stirred sluggishly, half in and half out of the shallow river, and Carrigan left his saddle in a long leap.

Llano's eyes were open, blazing slits of fire, when Carrigan dropped down be-

side him. Blood stained his face from a gash above his left ear. He was trying to drag himself from the water, and cursing the limpness of his arms.

"Man and boy I've lived for sixty odd years," he said brokenly, "and this is the fust time I ever rode into a guntrap. Served me danged well right if I'd got my head blowed off. Particularly after learnin' what I did in town."

Carrigan ripped a strip of cloth from his shirttail, soaked it in the river, and sponged the blood from his *segundo's* face. It wasn't much of a bandage but he bound it around Llano's head.

"If some gent's aim had been a mite better," he commented, "you'd be dead." Questions were pelleting around in his head like buckshot. What had Llano learned in Santone that should have made him wary of being dry-gulched before he could return to the bedgrounds? Why had his partner acted worried on learning Jones had spent the night in town? He and this Lew Manton had been the last men to ride the trail into Santone.

"You pass Barnes and a feller on this trail?" Carrigan asked.

"Barnes — that no-good, handsome, yellow-bellied pard you picked up in the *brasada.* Shake hands with the devil, Luke. It'd be safer. Told you that. Got somethin' else to tell you now." Llano Jones' old face worked, trying to concentrate. "Can't think," he muttered. "Warn't the whiskey. Drank a barrel of the stuff. Spent all my hard money, buyin' drinks for a gent named Cal Ronson. A barkeep at the Drover's. Had to git him drunk when he came off shift."

Why had Llano wanted to get the man drunk? What had he hoped to gain? "You were buyin' drinks for this gent?" Carrigan prompted desperately.

Llano Jones's eyes were green-gray like a cat's but they were blank now. Closed with pain, but he was still trying to pull his wits together.

"Find that barkeep," he croaked. "Find him—and don't sign nothin', Luke. Don't sign nothin'—"

"Did you meet Barnes on this trail?" Carrigan asked the question again, and he was so tense sweat started to bead his face.

Llano Jones managed to shake his head as his eyes closed. It was enough of an answer for Carrigan. A part of his mind registered the sound of an approaching wagon, while the rest of it was filled with speculation about Blackjack Barnes and Lew Manton. Both of them had carried booted carbines under their saddle-fenders as well as side-arms, and one of them had used his rifle to drop Llano Jones in the river.

Half-wild mustangs, with Carrillo on the chuckwagon seat behind them, tipped down into the bosquet of the river. He swung to an expert stop alongside the men on the beach.

"I come as soon as I can heetch up after seeing the blood on the *caballo's* saddle," he exclaimed. *"Dios,* the *señor* is dead?"

"Not yet," Carrigan said grimly, "but he needs a doctor. Help me load him in back. You drive him to Doc Gray's place in town."

"And you, *patron?"*

"I'll mosey on ahead to take the bushwhack lead that's trying to wipe out the Crossed C."

THE trail was empty to Santone. A few all-night celebrants in the Plaza were fumbling with their racked mounts, and early morning tipplers were moving into saloons that never closed.

Carrigan racked his mount in front of the Drover's. Jud Brokaw's office was across the Plaza, and he spotted Barnes' black Morgan hitched in front of it. What had Llano said? *"Don't sign nothin', Luke—"*

"Not until I find Cal Ronson," Carrigan promised himself, "and mebbe not then!"

The clerk at the desk gave him the barkeep's room number, and Carrigan moved upstairs. He knuckled a door and stepped inside. A tousled head looked up from a crumpled pillow.

"*Tejanos,*" he said thickly, "how can you all drink so much without gettin' drunk?"

Carrigan grinned. "You raised a powerful thirst out in the *brasada.* Take my *segundo,* Llano Jones—"

"You take him!" Cal Ronson groaned. "A barkeep should pour drinks for the customers, not himself."

"What were you tellin' him last night that made him bushwhack bait this morning?"

Ronson passed a hand over his brow and groaned. "Somethin' about Brokaw bein' a piker to start with. He never buys a barkeep a drink and damned few for anybody else, where four-bits' worth of liquor won't turn into a dollar for him. But he was buyin' for this slick, black-haired gent last night, and that weasel-faced Lew Manton."

Blackjock Barnes, Manton, and Brokaw. "Go on." Carrigan said, and the muscles in his jaws felt tight.

"Funny thing about some of these gents," Ronson added waspishly, "they never seem to figure a barkeep is human, or got ears. Makes you sore, and I guess that's why I got friendly with this old coot who looked like he just come in from the *brasada.* Claimed his boss had a herd for sale, and I told him not to let him get the trimmin' this slick-haired hombre was tryin' to give his partner.

"Seems this Blackjack gent hit Brokaw with a proposition yestiddy that sounded good. Said Blackjack found out Brokaw was willin' to pay eight dollars a head for beef, so he made a deal that'd make 'em both some money. He agreed to deliver the herd for seven dollars, savin' Brokaw three thousand dollars. Then together they rode out to the bedgrounds and this Blackjack tried to talk his pard into takin' five bucks for the herd. If he coulda done that he'd pocketed the extra six thousand and nobody the wiser. But the pard held out for six a head, and so this Blackjack and Brokaw was fixin' it up with Manton to go out this mornin' and act like a drover willin' to pay six. Still gives Brokaw his three thousand profit, and this Blackjack pockets three for hisself, plus his cut of the herd money. Slick, ain't it?"

Carrigan stood silent for a moment. "Mighty slick," he said half to himself. "Mighty slick, but not half so slick as she's going to turn out!"

He left the barkeep staring after him, and he didn't hear the man mutter, "I'm glad I ain't buckin' that big son—"

Carrigan went down the stairs three at a time, and he was striding toward the front doors when a voice coming through the arched opening into the saloon halted him in his tracks.

"I tell yuh I ain't drunk," a man was expostulating. "Dang it, there ain't nothin' the matter with me 'ceptin' a little crease in the haid. What I need is a horn to clear my eye—"

The voice was Llano's. Carrigan changed direction, moving into the barroom. "Give him a drink," he ordered the barkeep, "and I'll have one myself."

"Luke!" Llano Jones whooped, and then he sobered. "You ain't signed anything, have you?"

Carrigan looked at his *segundo,* and his lips were straight as a branding iron. "And not goin' to," he said softly. "How'd you like to take the Crossed C to Wichita?"

BUT it wasn't the Crossed C any more. It was the CB. Luke Carrigan found that out in a hot swirl of dust from the Crossed C cattle his

vaqueros were splitting from the main trail herd.

The riders came at noon, an even half dozen, and the dust bannering up from the herd was enough to tell them what was happening.

Llano, with a bloody bandage askew under his Stetson, saw them coming and rode to Carrigan's side, loosening his Colt as he did so.

"They waited longer than I figgered," he said sardonically. "Mebbe they've been over at the Drover's doin' some more drinkin' and talkin'."

Carrigan shrugged. He had already seen the flash of sunlight on a silver badge.

"Keep that gun in its holster," he advised. "It looks like Blackjack brought the law along with him."

"That Barnes is as full of tricks as sideshow barker," Llano Jones growled. "Watch him, Luke."

Carrigan nodded wordlessly.

The cavalcade rode up and halted. Three were members of Barnes's crew, the fourth was Lew Manton, and the fifth was Sheriff Ben Townsend, eyes shrewd beneath white brows.

Carrigan nodded to the lawman, waited for his partner to speak.

Barnes's face was dark and flushed, but his voice was soft when he spoke. "You didn't show up at Brokaw's, pard, so I figgered somethin' musta held you up. Such as cuttin' out a few beef—"

"Fifteen hundred head to be exact," Carrigan said. "Seemed the thing to do after Llano got bushwhacked comin' home from town this mornin'. Funny, but he never saw you or Manton here before it happened."

"We took a pasear off to one side to look at another herd," Barnes said easily. "Seems strange anybody take a shot at you, Jones."

Llano's hand was close to his Colt, when he answered. "Not so funny as gents forgettin' barkeeps have ears. You been countin' the three thousand you ain't goin' to rake in, Barnes?"

Carrigan was watching, and he had to admire his partner's coolness. Barnes shrugged.

"That bullet musta made you loco, Jones. I don't know what you're talkin' about, but I savvy what those Mex's are doin', Luke," he looked at Carrigan, and dark eyes clashed with gray. "You feel like goin' to jail?"

"Not today," Carrigan drawled.

"That's where you'll land," Barnes said triumphantly, "unless you tell those greasers to throw that herd back together. There's a CB brand on every one of those critters, and it stays there until they're sold. Try and cut that herd, Carrigan, and I'll ask Sheriff Townsend to do his duty!"

"Can a man rustle his own cattle, sheriff?" Carrigan asked.

Ben Townsend looked uncomfortable. "It's a p'int I never had to examine before, Luke. But I figger as long as they're road-branded you all better keep 'em together."

"That bein' the case, we better start pushin' 'em up the trail then, because the Crossed C is goin' to Kansas—!"

Barnes stiffened in his saddle. Reno Marrs, his *segundo,* started to slide his hand closer to his holster.

"Leave it alone, Mars!" Carrigan advised sharply, "unless you want the sheriff to referee a shootin' match."

"Now, boys," the sheriff was floundering like a seal out of water, "there ain't going to be no cause for gunplay. Leastways not in my territory." His eyes turned sternly from one partner to the other. "Remember that, you two. Fust trouble I hear about you're both going to jail!"

"That checks it to us, Blackjack," Carrigan said coolly. "Do we drive to Wichita, or let the herd starve right here?"

Watching his partner, Carrigan could

almost see the quick working of Barnes's mind. The man was trying to figure a way to turn this development to his advantage.

Suddenly, then, Barnes smiled. "Luke," he said, "we can sure make a stab at it! Let's bury the hatchet and start pullin' together in single harness. What do you say, pard?"

With the sheriff watching, Carrigan shook hands with his *brasada* parnter, but the gesture was worthless as a plugged peso. Carrigan had won this round, but there was something in Barnes's eyes that said, *The next will be mine.*

CHAPTER THREE

Hell—Or Glory

ROLL 'em north to hell! Away from San Antonio, winding toward the Red—ten, twelve, fourteen miles between dawn and dark, over prairies green with spring grass. Riders at point and drag and flank. A calico steer with moss on his horns, undisputed leader of the herd.

Reno Marrs, sharp-eyed, double-gunned, shouting to his men, riding hell-bent to keep strays pointed straight into the long serpentine line that stretched hundreds of feet wide and miles long, always pushing toward the horizon.

Llano Jones, whang-leather and whey, trying to out-do Reno Marrs.

Spanish crackled in the air, mingling with *Tejano* oaths. It was the strangest outfit ever to trail out of Texas. Hatred mixed with dust by day, and mingled in tired voices by night—hatred and distrust, tying men together with bonds stronger than friendship.

So they drove north under clear skies with good weather speeding the march.

And Barnes? He was gay and laughing, mocking his dour partner. The odds were favoring him now, the advantage his.

"Keep an eye on him, Luke," was Llano Jones's watchword. "You watch that bushwhackin' son. I'll handle the cattle. And don't be forgettin' he'll strike when ye least expect it. Mebbe we're smart to make this drive and mebbe we ain't. That hombre's out to take the whole herd now. He aims to fill some graves along the Chisholm."

"That's a game two can play at," Carrigan would answer briefly. "It's a long trail to Wichita."

The days rolled into weeks and they came to the banks of the Red, with the prairie dog country stretching beyond, and the dark forests of the Nations banking like clouds along the far horizon. By a common consent they halted on the shelf above the river and surveyed the shallow spread of the stream below them.

Barnes shook his dark head. "The Red can be two kinds of a devil," he remarked. "Sometimes she's bankful and you got to swim 'er. Sometimes she's low, like right now, and you've got to walk across. Mebbe the quicksands are hard enough so you can make it, but mebbe they're like jelly. If they are we'll pave the way with dead beef."

There was truth in Barnes' every word, Carrigan knew, and he heard old Carrillo, sitting behind his red mules in the chuck-wagon alongside them cough politely. That was the Mexican's way of letting it be known that he had something to say.

Carrigan hipped around in his saddle. "You got an idee, *amigo?*"

"Whan I am a leetle boy in Mejico," he said hesitantly, "I see a river such as this with a bed full of the sands that keel. *Mi padre* he takes wan hundred *caballos* and gallops them very fast back forth across the sands until they are packed hard for the *vacas* to cross. We lose not one steer!"

Carrigan looked at Barnes and he could not keep the triumph from his eyes. "We've got the horses," he remarked.

Blackjack Barnes looked sour. "It ain't

a bad idea," he admitted. "I was fixing to mention the same plan."

Blackjack Barnes wouldn't give a greaser credit for anything, and as he turned away Carrigan saw the hellfire gleaming in Carrillo's old eyes.

They crossed the Red on a trail packed as hard as a road with quaking pits of destruction waiting on either side, and Carrigan said to Carrillo that night, "They'll be a heap of good tequila waiting for you in Wichita."

"Es nada, señor," the old Mexican murmured. "Thees Weechita she is far away. Death is close."

Carrigan hunkered beside the dying embers of the cook fire that night, smoking, thinking, trying to put himself in Barnes' shoes.

If I wanted to steal a herd here on the Chisholm, when would I go about doin' it? And the reply a small sardonic voice seemed to give him brought no satisfaction. *You ain't the kind who'd steal anything so I cain't answer that one for you!*

In his blankets beneath the chuck-wagon Llano Jones was snoring like a wheezy squeeze-box, but there was another sound in the night that seemed alien. It wasn't the singing of nighthawks out around the herd that caught at Carrigan's atention, but the strumming of Barnes's infernal guitar. He played the thing every night about the cook fire at their chuckwagon.

Carrigan built a cigarette, listening to the instrument, and his ear told him it was a little off key, the fingers on the strings not quite so nimble as usual.

Mebbe he's run out of red-eye to oil 'em, Carrigan thought caustically. *Mebbe* —another surmise crashed through his mind—*that ain't Barnes strumming the strings—*

He snuffed the cigarette beneath his heel, and unlatched his spurs. If Blackjack Barnes wanted to ease away from his

wagon for a private palaver there would be no better way to do it than to make them think he was still in camp plinking that guitar.

Carrigan eased through spring grass, thankful for the soft mat under his feet. Barnes's chuckwagon was a dim, looming shape against the darkness, outlined by the faint luminance of the cowchip cook fire.

There was only one man hunched on a stone beside the coals, the guitar cradled in his arms. Carrigan crept to within twenty feet. He stretched in the grass, waiting for the other's head to lift.

The man with the guitar was Reno Marrs!

Carrigan eased back to camp. A touch woke his *segundo*.

"Ain't my hitch at the herd yet, is it?" he mumbled.

"*Nada,*" Luke said softly. "Listen, *amigo,* that's Reno Marrs playin' the guitar."

"He ain't no wuss than Barnes." Then the import of the news struck him. "Huh? Where is that black son?"

"That's what I aim to find out," Carrigan answered grimly.

"He's been playin' that cussed thing every night jest so we'd figure him in every time we heerd it. Luke, that cuss is smarter'n a coyote on the prowl!"

"And the Nations," Carrigan's voice sounded like chipped ice, "ain't more'n an hour away on a fast bronc."

"There's Injuns and outlaws settin' in them forests like wolves waitin' to skin any herd that ain't watched mighty close. If a gent could get enough of them together—"

Carrigan drew his gunbelt a notch tighter. "There's one way to find out," he murmured and, with a touch of his old humor, added, "Keep the home fires burnin' till I get back."

One of his brown-skinned *vaqueros* was nighthawking the cavvy. "Felipe," he spoke softly to the Mexican, "rope the black out of my string."

"Ah, *patrone.*" Relief lay in the *vaquero's* tones. "I pray you or Señor Jones will come to the cavvy. I could not leave to tell you that Señor Barnes he came to ask for hees Morgan. He says he take ride to the herd, but I watch and he turn so as to mees the *vacas.* He swing north, *señor.*"

Carrigan rode the night. Enough herds had already passed this way to leave the Chisholm a broad band of beaten dust across the dark prairie. Felipe had guessed that Barnes had had a half hour start, so he kept his black at a gallop. Dust muffled the beat of the animal's hoofs and the miles reeled beneath them. The towering trees that marked the Nations were close enough now for him to make them out as a dark band against the sky, and somewhere in that maze Blackjack Barnes was seeking a rendezvous with the wolf-pack.

Carrigan eased the pace of the black, and he thought he saw a light blink on and off. Hardly a spark, yet visible against the gloom. Then he realized it was the glow of a small campfire, and that trees passing between him and the flames gave it that spotlighted appearance.

The next time the light appeared he turned directly toward it across the short grass plain. Angling to the right, he reached dense underbrush, topped by the forest giants. Carrigan tethered the black and moved to the left on foot, skirting the brush, seeking the trail that led into the fire. He found it, finally, a dark tunnel hacked through the brush, and his fingers loosened his Cavalry Colt.

No one barred his way, and Carrigan, remembering other nights when he had scouted Union lines, made his silent way along the hard-packed path. This was one of the outlaw roads cut into the heart of the vast forests of the Indian Nations. He had heard there was a veritable network

of them, known only to men on the dodge. And Blackjack Barnes had ridden here without hesitation. He could hear the hum of voices now, and slowed his pace again. The trail twisted and he could see the campfire in a nest of rocks with soogans and riding gear scattered about.

Closer now, he eased into the brush, parting it with his fingers. There were four men about the fire. Two who were squatting on their haunches were bearded and unkempt, only the shells in their gunbelts looking bright and clean. Blackjack Barnes was striding in restless circles about the seated men, talking as he moved. Then he got a look at the third man as the other turned to accept a jug being passed to him.

Surprise almost betrayed Carrigan. The third man was Jud Brokaw!

"I CAN'T waste much more time here," Barnes was saying impatiently. "Damn it, Jud, the plan is foolproof. Ain't I had plenty time to think it over, ridin' up the trail with that big son? All it takes is timing. We'll bed down just about opposte here tomorrow night. I'll see to that. Come dark the boys you've gathered will Injun up and stampede the herd this way. My hands will keep 'em movin' and if we run down a few greasers on the way it won't hurt my feelin's. One of us might even get a shot at Carrigan and if we can drop that big son our troubles will start being little ones."

"Little ones my big foot!" Brokaw said gutturally. "Three thousand cattle to round up in this damned jungle?"

"My boys are handy at that," one of the men at the fire drawled. "They made mighty good wages runnin' off bunches from the herds that came thisaway last year, then sellin' 'em back to the trail bosses fer a dollar a head."

"You'll get that and more this time," Barnes promised. "Come asking three and Carrigan won't be able to pay his share. There ain't a pocketful of hard money in all his shirt tail outfit."

Blackjack Barnes had thta answer right, Carrigan thought ruefully. It had taken most of their cash to load the chuckwagon for this drive.

"Ask three," Barnes continued, "and I'll offer to take his share of the herd off his hands for four bits a head. It's worth that to get his name on a bill of sale. Makes everything legal, and then we can drive on to Wichita. It's a sixty-thousand-dollar gamble, Jud. Makes our first plan look like chicken-feed."

"But it's my money you use to pay these gentlemen," Brokaw whined. "And think of the cattle we maybeso can't round up yet. Those we lose, but so—I guess the gamble is good."

A horseman was coming along the outlaw trail. Carrigan heard the sound of hoofs and his Colt came smoothly into his hand.

A hail winged along the trail. "Any of you gents tie a black bronc in the brush a piece away?"

Luke Carrigan was moving before the man on the trail finished his question. He heard a shout from the fire. "No hoss of ours. Bring the critter in."

Carrigan saw the horse and rider as he roundede the crook in the trail. The view was mutual and a rifle bucked and crashed in the rider's hand. Carrigan felt lead singe his neck. Luke targeted the flash of the other's weapon, felt the gun lap in his hand. Lead tipped the rider back in his saddle. His hands clawed for the pommel, and gripped thin air. Carrigan heard the rifle clatter down and leaped in. The black nsorted and tried to rear. Luke laid his left hand on the reins, and he clubbed the sagging figure in the saddle with his Colt.

Behind him voices were howling, and

a random bullet cut through the branches above his head. Carrigan smashed a blow at the rider's face, felt bone crunch beneath the barrel. The man toppled toward him, dead as he fell. Carrigan kicked the outlaw's boot from the stirrup, rammed his own foot into the bow and swung to the saddle.

This time he let the black rear, wheeling on the narrow trail. Twisting half around, he thumbed two quick shots back the way he had come. It might slow pursuit, and Carrigan didn't want any of them at the fire to get a look at him even in the dark. Particularly Barnes. That double-crossing son would learn the identity of their owlhoot visitor soon enough, Carrigan promised himself.

HE CUT a wide circle to come into the cavvy from the south. The herd lay to the east, far enough from the chuckwagon so that none of the nighthawks would even hear his approach.

Felipe was waiting for him. "Deed I hear the sound of gons maybe wan hour ago, *señor?*" he asked.

"I'd hate to guess about that," Carrigan said dryly. "But don't ask Barnes the same question when he rides in."

"That one!" the Mexican's voice dripped venom.

Llano Jones was pouring coffee when Carrigan eased into camp.

"You leave Barnes for buzzard bait?" he asked sourly.

"*Nada,*" Carrigan said, and he took the tin cup Jones handed him, and built a cigarette. He rested on his heels, tasting the smoke, wondering whether the next night might bring him his last quirly.

Briefly, he sketched the meeting he had interrupted. "Barnes had the chance before we left Santone to tally this scheme with Brokaw," he concluded, "but that fat cuss don't like it because he's the one who stands to lose if the stampede don't pan out."

"And how in hades we goin' to keep it from pannin' out?" Llano asked. "We got to bed down, and once we do nothin' this side of hell can keep them outlaws from ridin' in through the dark and starting our herd running. All it'll take is a couple of gents wavin' slickers and yellin', and them longhorns will high-tail it for parts yonderly. There won't be enough of us to turn 'em, not with Barnes' gunhung bunch helping the rustlers and takin' pot shots at us. Only thing I can see to do is have a showdown when Barnes comes.

"Which won't keep those outlaws from jumping us," Carrigan answered slowly. "Killin' Blackjack won't save the herd."

"That devil whipsaws us every turn we take," Llano Jones groaned. "Luke, if we can't do it that way we're licked."

Carrigan was silent so long his *segundo* didn't think he was going to get an answer. Then Carrigan stirred and said, "When I came drifting home at the shank end of 'sixty-six men in Santone were talking about Charlie Goodnight and Oliver Loving. Seems they'd made a drive to New Mexico across the Staked Plains that everybody had told' em was impossible. Chief reason for that claim was a ninety-six mile dry march."

"Ain't no steer can walk ninety-six miles without water," Llano said sententiously. "Take 'em a week to do it—"

"They made it a mite over three days," Carrigan told him musingly. "They lost stock from thirst but not the walkin'."

"Glory be!" Llano whispered. "I'm beginning to get the drift of yore talk—"

"There ain't a critter in the world tougher than a Texas longhorn. You can run the tallow off their bones, but you can't walk 'em to death. And they're going to be walkin' mighty fast come tomorrow. Fact is they're goin' to be runnin' a good heap of the day and night. Come

mornin' you rope ol' Calico and put an ox bell on him. The herd will be used to the sound of it by night and foller him if he leads 'em to hell."

"Glory," Llano Jones was whispering. "Glory! Barnes wants a stampede and that's jest what he'll get—only it'll be headin' in the right direction. Them outlaws and Brokaw won't be able to see us for dust. Lord, I'd like to see that slick-ear's face when them rustlers hold out their hands for pay on the cattle they didn't rustle!"

THE time for planning was past, the time for riding at hand. Like a juggernaut the CB herd was rolling toward that danger strip paralleling Jud Brokaw's outlaw camp.

Twin slickers in the hands of *vaqueros* had started it that morning after the herd was lined out for what appeared to be another normal day's drive. Then their slickers had started popping, and in one mighty surge the longhorns were high-tailing it for the horizon, with old Calico leading the way.

Carrigan, off to one side in the dust that rose like brown fog, watched that hell-bent herd, and there was a humorless smile on his lips. Guns for *vaqueros* had come from the chuckwagon that gray dawn, and quick words of instructions.

"Each of you pair off with one of Barnes's *Tejanos*. Stay close enough to keep an eye on 'em, and if you see them trying to swing the herd toward the Nations use those guns!"

"Sta bueno!" they'd said to a man, and their dark eyes told of a hatred close to the surface.

Now they were whipping past in the clouding dust, shadowy men pacing the cattle, pacing each other, jockeying for position.

A horseman showed through the swirling dust, and Carrigan swung the big bay he was riding to face Blackjack Barnes. His hand rested lightly on the stock of his Colt, and the time to put cards on the table had come. Luke Carrigan liked the idea, as he thought of how close Llano had come to death in the bosque of the San Antonio river, of the beating he'd taken, of the double-cross that had backfired.

Barnes's face was streaked with dirt and the hot sweat of anger. "Been lookin' for you," he gritted. "What the damnation hell got into them two greasers? Didn't they know they'd start a stampede? We'll string the drag from here to the Canadian if we don't get them cattle to circling. And every time one of my men tries to cut the herd there's a greaser on his tail riding him down, keeping the herd running. What's the idea, Carrigan? I'm askin' you!"

Luke rested easy in the saddle, but his muscles were keyed to alertness. "You know," he drawled, "Reno Marrs ain't half as good on that gittar as you."

Blackjack Barnes stiffened in his saddle. The lids drew down across his eyes like curtains, and his hand hung poised above the butt of his Colt while trail-dust swirled about them, dancing to the earth-shaking rhythm of running hooves.

Carrigan waited, ready and willing for the showdown, and heard Barnes mutter, "The sign ain't right. It ain't right—"

His posied hand dropped, and his spurs raked the flanke of his mount. He rode back the way he had come, and Carrigan found a bitter taste in his mouth. One of them would never ride home from Wichita.

He touched spurs to his mount, riding the left flank of the herd beyond the limit of dust, and he kept bullet-gray eyes on the bank of trees to the west. They were riding he danger strip now, passing Jud Brokaw's outlaw camp. Once in the distance he saw riders, skulking like wolves along the flank of the herd, but they came

no closer. Turning the herd now would be like trying to change the course of a swirling river.

Ride, and ride hard for the Canadian. Ribs began to show like slats under drawn skin. Flanks began to sag. They went ahead for two days, two nights. Time began to lose meaning, and then, weary heads lifting, cattle smelled water. Water for man and beast alike. The South of the Canadian!

Carrigan soaked caked trail dust and sweat from his body in the cool waters of the river. Llano Jones splashed beside him, soaking the ache from his tired muscles.

"I never thought we'd make it," he kept repeating. "Danged if I did. Yuh ought to see them longhorns eat. There won't be much run left in 'em."

Carrigan's face had thinned until it was only skin over bones. "We'll keep 'em that way by pulling out for the North Fork tomorrow."

"My men are aimin' to rest up here for a few days," the voice spoke from the brushy trail opening on the stream. Blackjack Barnes stepped into view, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. "You've been riding this outfit with rough spurs, Carrigan, and I'd sure hate to see you play out your string. Fellers have been known to drown in this here river. Sometimes the bodies ain't ever recovered to prove whether they were weighted with a little lead."

"And some," old Carrillo's voice came from the brush on the opposite side of the trail, "seenk even faster with a *cuchillo* in their bellies. You weesh to make the test, *señor?*"

Barnes's hand fell away from his belt, and he turned like a man half blind and punched back the way he had come.

Carrigan grinned at Llano. "There ain't nothing like coppering your bets. I aimed to see whether Blackjack was still on the prod."

"He is," Llano Jones said grimly, "and don't forget it for a minute, because when that one minute comes along you'll be daid!"

THE strange drive rolled on, up across the vast plains of Kansas. Men were wary, watchful, wrathful; nerves were raw, eyes vigilant. It was a powder-keg one flaming gun could ignite into vengeful, senseless slaughter. Even Blackjack Barnes seemed to realize this, for he kept his crew under at least surface control.

The cavvy, running full tilt, hardened quicksands in the North Fork, and then that branch of the Canadian lay behind them.

Across prairie then, green with spring grass that helped fill sagging flanks. A trail to follow that Jess Chisholm's bullwains had blazed down to the Nations far behind them now.

Wichita was coming closer each passing day—and death for one man from Texas!

The Salt Fork was forded and the epic herd plodded toward the Cowskin, forking off from the Arkansas.

Tension grew with each passing day. Carrigan doubted that Barnes would make one last try to steal the herd—they were getting too close to Wichita, and what might pass for frontier law. If one of his crew survived to reach the town and tell the story of this hell-drive to Kansas, Blackjack Barnes would find himself behind bars.

A point-riding *vaquero* the next morning reported the Cowskin ahead, and even the longhorns speeded their gait, seeming to sense the end of the trail.

"Danged if I ever figgered we'd make it!" Even Llano Jones was showing excitement, as he brought Carrigan the point-rider's news. Barnes showed his white teeth in a grin. "Well, pard," he

said good humoredly, "we're about there, I hope they got some good-lookin' gals in Wichita!"

"I hope they've got the gold to buy three thousand longhorns!" Carrigan said flatly.

"They'll have it and more," Barnes said confidently. "How about riding over for a drink after you get slicked up, and we'll sashay into town together?"

Carrigan nodded. *"Bueno,"* he agreed. "Looks like we ought to be able to make camp and sell a herd before dark."

Llano Jones shook his old head after the men spurred back to the herd. "That cuss acts like he's willin' to admit we've out-snookered him, but that's when he's usually got the biggest ace of all up his sleeve."

They bedded down beyond the Cowskin, and a red sun watched from out of the west.

Carrigan grinned at his old cook. "Don't go to bed early," he cautioned. "There'll be a jug of the best tequila in town come back with me tonight. And tomorrow you'll have plenty pesos in your pockets."

Wild and woolly Wichita was too tough to be tamed, but it didn't look overwild to the foursome riding in from the Cowskin. They paid their toll at the bridge spanning the Arkansas and rode abreast into the west end of town. Douglass Avenue stretched before them, hock deep in dust, dozing in the late afternoon. A few farm wagons lined the curbs. There was a buckboard here and there, a cluster of cow ponies at the hitchrail in front of the Keno House, Wichita's proudest saloon.

"Don't look much like a boomtown to me," Llano Jones spoke the thoughts that had been running through Carrigan's mind.

Reno Marrs, riding next to Barnes, cast a long glance at the *Keno House*.

"Later," Blackjack said sharply.

The caption, HENRY & SONS, STOCK BUYERS, was lettered across the front of an office window, and Carrigan nodded toward it. "Let's pay 'em a visit," he suggested.

They tethered their mounts and swung down. Llano and Reno Marrs looking at each other like a pair of fighting cocks. Carrigan ignored them, excitement was starting to lift the beat of his pulse. This was trail's end for a drover. An office

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with gilt letters shining on the window!

A portly man wearing bushy gray burnsides rose from behind a rolltop desk as they entered, and a glance at their garb was enough to show him they were drovers.

Carrigan nodded to him. "We've got three thousand longhorns down the Cowskin. In Texas we hear they're worth twenty dollars a head."

Mr. Henry flinched like he'd been struck. He sat back in his chair, and seemed to have trouble finding his voice. "Gentlemen," he said at last, "gentlemen, I hardly know what to tell you. Two weeks ago I would have bought your herd sight unseen. Today I cannot even quote you a price. The market has broken in Kansas City and Chicago. It looks like everybody in the East has turned vegetarian!"

Blackjack Barnes swung toward Carrigan. "You damned fool!" he said, his voice a snarl. "We should have sold in Santone and let some other drover take this."

"You've got a short memory," Luke Carrigan said, and his words beat in the room like buckshot. "You tried to sell me out in Santone, and when that wouldn't work you hired a bunch of toughs to polish me off. You bushwhacked Llano because he heard too much talk, and you and Brokaw tried to steal the herd in the Nations. So we brought it through to this—to no sale. Seems like some kind of justice to me!"

Blackjack Barnes's voice was like the screech of a file over metal. "I'll sell those longhorns, but they'll be mine—"

His hand moved like lightning toward his hip, and Carrigan flung himself forward in a dive for the man he had called partner since leaving the San Antonio.

Barnes's Colt spewed lead, and Llano's yell of warning was drowned by the sound. Carrigan felt a bullet scorch across his shoulder, and then his arms were about Barnes's knees. They fell together with a shock that rattled the windows, and Carrigan felt Barnes's breath against his face as he fought for the man's Colt. A fist caught him between the eyes, and his fingers slipped on Barnes's wrist. He felt the muzzle against his ribs and twisted desperately, sledging down at his partner's face. His knuckles smashed through flesh, and the Colt exploded. Carrigan felt an unaccustomed warmth against his ribs, but he still fought for possession of Barnes's gun. The barrel of it was slippery against his hand, wet with blood. His ears were keen enough to hear the sound of the hammer drawing back, and he twisted the barrel as the weapon exploded a third time. But Barnes's body was suddenly limp beneath him, and Carrigan was conscious of hands helping him to his feet.

"I allus knew," Llano said, "that I could beat that Reno Marrs to the draw, and I did. You shoulda seen his face when he went down, still didn't look like he believed I'd killed him."

Carrigan didn't answer his *segundo* for a moment. Reno Mars lay on the floor, and his body was close to Barnes. "Two men are goin' back to Texas," he said, half to himself, "back to the Crossed C—"

"Danged if I knew who'd be makin' the trip," Llano confessed.

"That goes double," Carrigan said briefly. "Howsomever, we've still got a herd on our hands."

A cough interrupted him. "We will have the law to consider," said Mr. Henry primly, "but I will testify you gentlemen fought in self-defense. Your partner, Mr. Carrigan, never allowed me to finish my discourse. If you will hold your herd for a period of two weeks or so I feel certain it will be worth twenty dollars or more a head!"

Carrigan looked at the cattle buyer. "We'll hold 'em," he said. "We'll hold 'em, come hell or high water. And we've seen plenty of both!"

The Redemption of Rincon Jack

Desperate, weary, Rincon Jack came back to make one final effort to square an old debt . . . so he'd be free to join his kid brother —seven years dead!

By DAN KIRBY

He drew as he spoke, for the odds were three to one, and he was here to kill. . . .

HE RODE into Apache at high noon and checked his buckskin saddle mare at the local livery, then shouldered his saddle roll and headed for the hotel across the street. The hotel clerk, a wizened, grayhaired man, took one long appraising look at him and shoved the dog-eared register across the counter.

"You can pick yore own name," the oldster grunted, "but you got to sign the register. That's the law and I ain't one to go agin it."

He took the stubby, blunt pencil from the clerk, and stared at the finger-smeared

page. Finally he wrote, "Owen Jackson," and left the address line blank, for he was not from any place in particular. He took the key from the oldster and matched its number with a door on the second floor. Inside the room he slung his saddle roll into a corner and sprawled wearily across the rickety, musty bed.

He stayed on the bed for an hour, not moving, and yet not sleeping. Finally he rose and sloshed water into the wash pan from the big pitcher beside it. He washed some of the gray film of trail dust from his face and dried himself on a towel that had been well used by the previous occupant of the room. Once he caught his reflection in the mirror on the wall, and the face that stared back at him was that of an old man with ragged whisker stubble and dark holes for eyes. The reflection lied, for he was barely thirty.

He left the room and walked through the lobby to the street. Men gave him a single brief glance and lost interest, for there was nothing preposessing in his appearance. He was medium tall with the slightly stooped shoulders and hollow flanks that go with long hours in the saddle. His pants and jacket were of blue denim, worn thin and faded to a dirty gray. His movements were slow, almost hesitant, and in keeping with the desolate, washed out look of his stone-gray eyes.

He stopped in front of the Golden Horn Saloon and rolled a smoke, letting it droop unlighted between dry, weather-cracked lips. There was a tense undercurrent of impending violence on this street. It was apparent in the silent groups of men that lined the boardwalk, in the muted voices of men passing by. He sensed these things instinctively for they were familiar, but they aroused no interest within him.

He had come back to this town because the urge to do so had worn away his judgment. It was as if he'd left something in this barren, forsaken spot when he'd pulled out seven years ago. Something which he could not name, but something so real and vital that he would never be whole again until it was regained. And of course there was Mort—Mort would be glad to see him. He'd want him to put out at the ranch, but it wouldn't be safe. There was always the chance of somebody's getting suspicious.

He shouldered his way inside the swinging doors and ordered a beer at the bar. The saloon was deserted except for a four-handed stud game going on in a far corner. The bartender wiped a damp cloth along the unvarnished pine bar.

"You one of the gents Red Shane is puttin' on?"

He looked at the bartender blankly. "Shane? Never heard of him."

"Lots of new faces showin' up in Apache lately," the barkeep said, idly. "Shane is bringing them in. Good pay, I hear."

He set down his glass and wiped a hand across his mouth. "I wonder," he asked hesitantly, "if you've seen Mort Owens in town today?"

The bartender looked at him queerly. "Mort Owens? No, stranger, not today nor the past seven years. Mort's dead."

It was the first time he'd heard it. It should have come as a shock to him, but it didn't. Maybe it was because he'd reached that low point where nothing much seemed to make any difference; or maybe he had subconsciously known it all the time, but had shut it up inside him because he could not face the truth.

He asked, over-casually, "How did he go?"

The bartender wiped sweat from his fat face with the towel. "You must be way off yore range, stranger. Remember back seven eight year ago when that young hellion, Rincon Jack, was riding high and wide around here? Well, Mort was his brother. Rincon Jack was so far outside the law you couldn't have dragged him back with a twenty mule team, but Mort

was straight as six o'clock, and folks liked him. Rincon had things all his own way for quite a spell, but the law finally trapped him back in the hills and shot him up some. He got away, but some of the valley men got the idee that Mort was hiding his kid brother out somewhere. They kept a lookout on the job and spotted Mort one morning leading a saddled horse down into the rough country. By the time they got a posse together Mort had delivered the horse, but I reckon he figured Rincon was still too weak to make a getaway without a good lead. Anyway, Mort tried to stand off that posse by his lonesome, and did a right good job for a couple of hours. 'Course they finally nailed him. You must remember somethin' about that, stranger. Everybody was talkin' about it then."

He remembered all right. *Mort, you hadn't oughta' took the chance of bringing a horse down here. I told you I thought I'd spotted a man up on the mesa. They're on to you, Mort. Yeah, all right, I'll do like you say. I'll head for the border and never come back. I ain't worth botherin' with, but thanks anyway. Keep an eye peeled goin' back. I don't like that gent ridin' around up there.*

The barkeep slid another glass of beer down the bar and drew one for himself. "Yeah, Rincon Jack was hell on wheels around here for a while, but I think that run-in with the posse took all the sand outta his craw or he'd never come crawling to Mort for help. He knowed Mort was tryin' to build up a spread and plannin' to marry Ruth Simms, and he knew what would happen to Mort if he got crossed up with the law. Anyway, Rincon got his over at Nogales about a week later. Couple of lawmen jumped him and he run like a scared rabbit, but he couldn't outrun those bullets. He's dead but he's still causing trouble around here. You shorely remember hearin' about him gettin' plugged, stranger?"

Remember? Hell, mister, I was there. I was there with four bullets in my back and wonderin' if they'd ever quit lookin' for me. It ain't something you'd be apt to forget, not if you had to climb a rock wall and wedge yoreself in a crevice while you held your belly in your hands to keep your innards from spilling out..

The bartender looked at him disgustedly. "Hell, you act like you ain't ever heard of Rincon Jack."

He said quietly, "Seven years is a long time."

A BIG, wide-shouldered man came through the door flanked by two gunhung, poker-faced range hands. The big man was red-faced and redheaded and he wore the kind of range garb that only the owners of big outfits can afford. He pulled his battered hat lower over his face, conscious that the red-faced range boss was watching him closely.

The big man said flatly, "You're a stranger here. You come in on a job or lookin' for one?"

He shook his head, keeping his eyes on his beer. "Driftin' through," he said.

The range boss looked at him, taking in the faded denims and rundown, heavy stock boots. "I'm hirin' riders," the man said bluntly. "You can go to work now. Top pay if you can use a gun."

He smiled thinly. "Mister, I don't own a gun."

The two gunhands behind the range boss laughed and the red-headed man grinned scornfully. "Then you better keep driftin'. This ain't gonna be a healthy place to be in between."

The range boss and his hands left as suddenly as they had come in. The barkeep let out a long breath. "That's Red Shane. He's roundin' up all the riders he can get aholt of. Reckon he's got more men now than the rest of the ranchers around here put together. When he gets set he'll shut off the pass. I've seen it

comin'. Reckon the others have too, but nobody knows how to stop it."

He did not ask what pass, or what it was being shut off for, and to him it made no difference. Nothing made any difference any more and never would again, he reckoned. A man who had been dead seven years found it hard to get interested in the troubles of men who were living.

He paid for his beer and went out onto the street. It had been a foolhardy thing, his coming back here. True, seven years was a long time in the memories of men, and there was little resemblance between the gun-toting young hellion, Rincon Jack Owens, and the desolate, bearded man who stood on this street today and called himself Owen Jackson. But there was always that chance of recognition, and it haunted him.

It had seemed easy at first to start a new life. It was a chance many beg for and never get. Rincon Jack was dead and in hell, and the posse and bounty hunters no longer searched the out-trails for sign of him. All he had to do was take a new name and settle down. But it hadn't worked out that way.

He had ranged far in the past seven years, from Mexico City to the coast of California, but it was always the same. Whether by some lonely campfire or in the bed of a crowded boomtown hotel, the urge to come back to the Rincon country would creep up on him and gnaw at his insides until sleep was impossible. If he closed his eyes it was only to see Mort coming over the rough country leading a saddle horse and a rider sitting motionless on the rim of the mesa. He would throw back the covers and get up, cold and clammy with his own sweat.

He was conscious of someone behind him and turned slowly to see one of Red Shane's gunhands staring at him. The gunman said coldly, "Maybe you didn't hear Shane, stranger. He said keep driftin'."

You wouldn't talk to Rincon Jack Owens like that, mister. No one ever crossed Rincon Jack unless he had him gun-covered and plenty of help backing him up. There ain't no one or three of you, including Shane himself, would have stood up to Jack in fair fight, if you could crawl out of it.

The gunman's eyes grew hard. "You deaf and dumb, stranger? I said drift, pronto."

He shrugged. "I was just leavin'," he said and turned away toward the livery down the street. You didn't talk back to men like the Shane gunhawk without you packed a gun yourself. And he hadn't strapped on a six-gun since the day word went out that Rincon Jack was dead. You packed a gun and you invited trouble. Trouble had a way of getting you in front of the law and that was a chance he could not take. Many a sheriff had looked at his hangrope wistfully when he heard Rincon Jack had been killed.

He led the buckskin out of the sagging gray barn and the hostler, a lanky, overalled man, followed him out. The hostler eyed him speculatively. "You signin' on with Shane?"

He shook his head, tightening the cinch straps on the saddle.

The hostler shifted a cud of cut plug. "Leavin', eh? Don't blame you. This town will be a good place to be from. I gotta' stay. I got a family."

He flipped the hostler fifty cents and led the buckskin to the hitch-rail in front of the hotel. There was no place for him in this town and never had been, not even when Mort was alive. Mort had tried to get him to settle down before it was too late. Mort even offered him a share in the spread he was starting. But he'd been cold on it.

Hell, Mort, you play it yore way and I'll play it mine. And when you're still dry nursin' those stinkin' cows I'll have my pile made. No hard feelings?

He went inside the hotel and to his room. He grabbed up his saddle roll and signed out with the old man behind the counter.

Outside he strapped on the roll, then, remembering that he had not eaten all day, he turned for the restaurant next door.

He stepped inside the restaurant and froze there, staring at the woman behind the counter. She was older now, and the years had been harsh with her, but her hair was still the same golden red that Mort had liked so well, and her figure had retained the slim grace that had set her apart from the others in the old days. It was her face that had changed, and her eyes. She looked now the way she had looked that night she had sought him out in the foothills.

You've got to get out of here, Jack. You're no good—you never have been and you never will be. They know you robbed that bank in Tucson and they're laying for you. If you drag Mort into this—

HE WIPED cold beads of sweat from his forehead and moved uncertainly to a stool at the counter. He ordered beef and potatoes, watching her furtively, but he was a stranger to her, and she served him without a hint of recognition.

He wanted to bolt his food and leave, but the past was too strong with him now. This was Mort's woman. The girl he would have married if Rincon Jack had not led him to a death trap; and through her presence it seemed to him that Mort was not to far away. It was a good feeling and he sought to prolong it.

He said, "Seems to be a little trouble brewin' in town. Who's this gent, Red Shane?"

Ruth Simms shrugged and refilled his cup with black coffee. "He's a man," she

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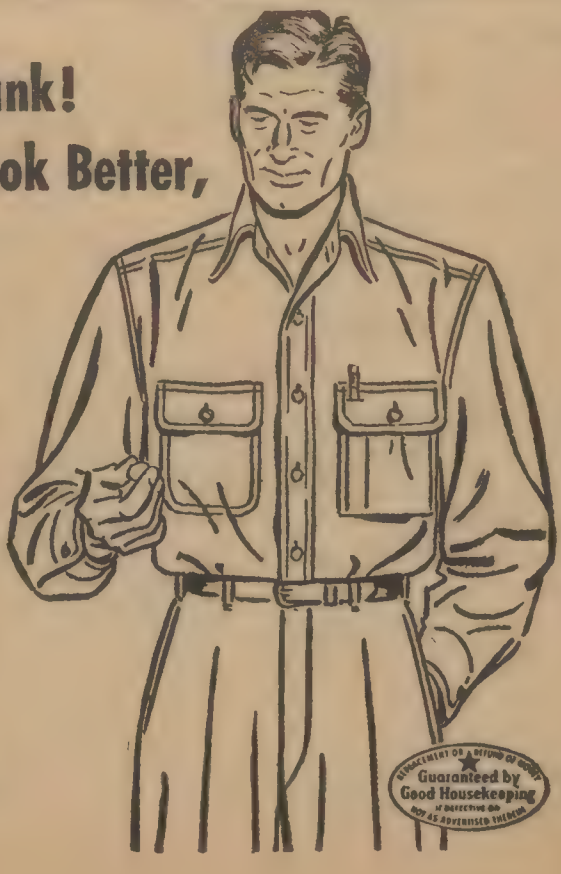

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said bitterly, "but he thinks he's a god. He came here less than eight months ago and bought a tax deed to a—piece of land. It's the last ten sections on the south end of the valley this side of the Rincons. It's the only way through the pass and now he's going to try to close off the pass from the other ranchers. That means the others will have to drive to market around the Rincons or over them. Either way it'll break them. Long drives are costly and their beef won't reach market until the fall drop in prices has set in." She paused and stared out the window at the street. "He can do it legally and he knows it, but the others will fight. He knows that, too, and he wants it. He can break them quick and the law will be with him all the way."

He was staring at her again. He said bleakly, "That land Shane grabbed off for taxes—that was Mort Owens's old spread."

He heard the sudden catch in her breathing and wished he hadn't said it. She asked sharply, "What do you know about Mort Owens?"

He shrugged and dropped his eyes to his cup. "I heard the story from the bartender at the Golden Horn." A bitter smile edged across his lips. "They killed Mort, didn't they; those ranchers who are hollerin' now? To hell with them, then. If they hadn't of shot Mort they wouldn't be in this fix."

"No!" she said. "No, you haven't heard the straight of it, stranger. They killed him, yes, but they didn't want to do it. He was their friend—but he was also Rincon Jack's brother and he couldn't forget it. Nobody blamed Mort for what he did—but you can't rightly blame the others for what they had to do, either. I've tried, but I know they were right. This is the doings of Rincon Jack, mister. He made life miserable for us while he was alive, and it goes on that way after his death. I wish he was here. I wish he could know what happened to Mort and what is happening to Mort's friends."

He kept his eyes on his plate, the food lying heavy on his stomach. He said, "The valley men were careless. They oughta' known what could happen if a stranger got control of that land. Why didn't they buy it in for taxes?"

The woman's lips tightened. "That was my fault, I guess. I went away after Mort was killed, but they knew I'd come back. I guess they figured I'd want Mort's spread, since we'd been plannin' to get married for so long." She looked through the door at the dusty street beyond. "Well, anyway, eight months ago I finally wrote them I was coming back and would pay up the taxes. But Red Shane had beat me to it. He slipped in from the border country and bought a tax title a week before I arrived."

He pulled the battered, wide-brimmed hat low over his face and laid a dollar on the counter. "This Rincon Jack Owens," he said bitterly, "seems to have been quite a heller. First it was Mort and you, and now it's the whole valley." He turned his back on the woman and walked out.

He went straight for his saddle mare in front of the hotel, trying to shut out from his vision the picture of the woman in the restaurant, taut-lipped with grief and bitter memories.

"It ain't too late to get on Shane's wagon, stranger. Might be a pretty good place to be when the smoke clears. Looks like Shane is the most man around here."

He jerked around to see the aged hotel clerk leaning indolently against the doorjamb of the hotel entrance. He shook his head. "Not for me, old-timer. This valley has had too much of me, already."

The oldster grinned thinly. "Shane told you to git, eh. Well, don't blame you for doing so. This place ain't gonna be fit for nothin' but buzzards when the first shot it fired. Seems a shame to think it wouldn't have happened if Mort Owens

coulda lived long enough to marry Ruth Simms."

He turned from the saddle and looked at the oldster questioningly. "How does that figger, old-timer?"

The old man shrugged. "Figures like the law says, stranger. Mort died and his land sold for taxes. Ten cents per acre I believe it was. If Ruth was his widow she'd have a year to redeem that land and all Shane would get is his money back. The law gives a man the right to redeem his land inside a year, and the same right goes to his heirs. But Mort didn't leave no kin, so I guess Shane is settin' solid."

For a moment those words froze him as their meaning beat against his brain, but when he moved there was a spring to his step that had not been there for seven years. A cold, savage purpose lighted up his eyes, washing out the dullness that was was a part of him. He whirled on the oldster. "You got a gun, old-timer? Any kind of a gun? Quick!"

"Why, now, stranger—sure. Brand new Smith and Wesson but—"

"Give it to me. Now. The horse and saddle is yores if I don't get back."

The oldster ducked inside the hotel and brought out the gun, some of the stranger's intense eagerness seeping into his own gaunt old frame. "What's up, mister? You changed yore mind about Shane?"

Rincon Jack Owens, alias Owen Jackson, smiled bleakly. "About a lot of things, pop." He shoved the gun inside his waistband and headed for the courthouse, wondering if old Asa Taylor was still the county treasurer.

ASA TAYLOR was dozing with his feet propped high on the desk. He looked through cracked lids at the bearded man who had barged into his office. "Office closes four o'clock, mister. Come back tomorrow." He closed his eyes again but a rough hand jerked him out of the swivel chair and he came up clawing air.

Rincon Jack brought out a worn leather wallet and counted out seven hundred dollars in wrinkled greenbacks. Money he'd saved these past years working at cowhand wages. Funny, he thought, that he'd never saved any of the big money he'd got his hands on in the old, wild days. There was as much difference in money, he reckoned, as there was in people. He said tightly, "Asa, I come to redeem Mort's land."

The old man shook his head as if trying to clear up the cobwebs that sleep had left there. He looked at Rincon Jack blankly. "Now, looky here, stranger, you can't do that. Red Shane already paid the taxes and got a certificate. Nobody can redeem that land now except Mort himself or his heirs. Mort's dead, and he had no heirs. Now git outta here and leave me be."

Rincon Jack grabbed the oldster by a shoulder. "Asa, look at me. I'm Jack Owens. Remember? Jack Owens, Asa. Here's seven hundred dollars. Now hurry it up."

The country treasurer rubbed sleep out of his watery blue eyes. "Jack Owens, huh. You're Jack Owens," he was saying the name but it wasn't registering. "How do I know that?"

Rincon Jack's hand rose and the six-gun in it punched hard at the oldster's flabby middle. "Would I admit it if it weren't so, Asa?"

The oldster's mouth flew open as sudden recognition lighted up his face. "Jack Owens! Rincon—"

Rincon Jack shoved the gun back in his waistband. "That's right, Asa, Rincon Jack Owens, back from hell and raising a little more. Now cancel Shane's tax certificate and give me a paid tax receipt. Then make out a deed to Ruth Simms. I'll sign it."

It's going to work out, Mort. Not like it should be, because you won't be with

her, but it still is the best I can do.

Asa Taylor was looking at him. "You hear what I'm sayin', Jack? Red Shane is out there on that street and all his gunhands are with him. You're too late. Here's the deed—sign it. It won't amount to a dam' because Shane is headin' for a war. You know what a range war does to a place, Jack."

He knew, all right. It would explode like a powder keg and flame all over the valley, and the victor was always in the right. After the smoke cleared and the dead were buried would come the ponderous court hearings, but the witnesses would be Shane's witnesses and the jury tainted with Shane money. The deed to Ruth would get lost, or the records burned, or someone would swear it never happened. Rincon Jack Owens died seven years ago, and how could he redeem land if he was dead?

Yes, he knew, all right. He had considered that. Well, hell, he'd been killed once, hadn't he? Why not twice? Maybe he had nine lives like a cat. He said quietly, "Put the deed on record, Asa."

Red Shane and his two top gunhawks were standing in the shade of the saloon. He moved towards them, wishing he had a holster for the six-gun, knowing he would be rusty on the draw after seven years.

Shane looked at him and his face became a little redder. "I thought we told you to drift?"

He looked at Shane and then at the two hard-faced gunmen flanking him. "I got me a gun now," he said.

The big cowman looked at the six-gun stuck deep in the waistband of the stranger's pants. He winked at his gunhands. "I reckon yore services would come pretty high?"

Rincon Jack braced himself. He said quietly, "pretty high. I done took yore ranch, Shane. Now I'll take you."

He drew as he spoke for the odds were three to one and he was here to kill, not to make a rep. His first shot ripped into the tall gunman on Shane's left who had followed the draw with one of his own. The gunman screamed and whirled around, then fell heavily, the fight and life blasted out of him.

What had been a joke to Red Shane had now become deadly serious, and Rincon saw the big man move with blinding speed as he threw himself out of line with Rincon's gun and made his own draw. Rincon Jack triggered again and the bullet caught the other gunhand in the stomach, doubling him over. Then Red Shane's gun opened up and the roar of it drowned the thud of lead that smashed into Rincon's body.

Shane fired again and Rincon staggered back from the force of the heavy slug, though it only gashed his ribs. He lined up Shane in front of his gun and stood there flatfooted and legs braced as his lead slowly beat the big man down. But Shane was a big man, and powerful and the will to live was a violent thing within him.

Rincon Jack saw the man brace himself on his knees, saw the heavy six-gun swing up to cover him. He tried to dodge but it wasn't any use. The bullet crashed into him, and he was conscious that he was falling. Through the pain that dimmed his eyes he saw the vicious grin on Red Shane's lips.

I've got to make it, Mort. I come this far with it. I got to finish it right—for both of us.

Red Shane's gun roared again but the sound was like distant thunder in his ears, and he scarcely felt the bullet that jerked his body as it struck home. He turned over on his belly and took his gun in both hands, steadying his arms with elbows on the ground. Red Shane was pulling himself up, using the hitching rail as a crutch. Rincon Jack squeezed off his last shot. Red Shane straightened up, then

fell limp, his body jack-knifing over the rail.

Rincon Jack Owens did not remember his ride out of town. Somewhere there was strength within him to crawl into the saddle and hang on as the horse carried him south. Dimly he knew that once the excitement in town died down, they would be after him. They would come as they had come before, armed to the teeth and after his blood because he was Rincon Jack, the outlaw. They would be valley men in the posse, men who owed him their very existence for what he'd done this day. And yet he could bear them no malice. They were law-abiding men and they lived by a code that was no distinguisher of persons. So it had been with Mort.

He didn't know whether he dismounted or fell from the saddle but he was in the rough country now, and it seemed to him that this was the very place where he'd hid out when Mort had taken care of him seven years ago. He could tell by the mesa rim that towered above. There was no pain in him now. Maybe he was too far gone for that, or maybe it was the warm, satisfied feeling inside him that drove out physical pain. Whatever it was he'd left in this desolate hole seven years ago he'd found now. He knew that by the way he felt. Maybe it was self-respect, maybe it was nerve, or perhaps just a debt he had left owing and had to pay.

There was a dust haze on the steep trail down a sloping side of the mesa. That would be the posse. Well, he couldn't always get away. There had to be a last time. Or did there? There was a rider coming up out of the rough country, a dim, gray figure leading an extra horse.

I kind of figured you'd be along, Mort.

He smiled and lay down to wait.

LAW AND DISORDER

RUFE MARLEY of Humboldt County, Nevada, believed in law and order. When, in the 1870's, the constituted authorities seemed inadequate to cope with the problem Marley and two friends, small ranchers like himself, constituted themselves an unofficial vigilante committee of three.

The three friends rode stagecoaches and roved the countryside in an effort to learn something of the band or bands that were rustling cattle, had twice held up the county bank, four times cleaned the stagecoach, and had even looted the general store.

After six such months one of Marley's companions, Jack, one evening sighted three evil looking horsemen with loaded saddlebags making for a tiny valley in the north of the rangeland. It was a task to follow them without betraying his presence. He marked the place where they disappeared from sight and the direction they had been traveling on a crude map he carried and hastened back to Marley. Marley informed him that three men earlier in the afternoon had robbed the stage.

The next day Rufe Marley and Jack stationed themselves in a spot, well hidden from all view, commanding the area where Jack had seen the three horsemen disappear. The three riders did not show up until evening. When they were sure the gunmen were well away Rufe and Jack backtracked until they discovered the hideaway. There they found sufficient evidence to convince them that these men had participated in at least a portion of the Humboldt country crime wave.

Taking some of the evidence with them they made tracks from there as fast as they could to the office of the sheriff. The next day the sheriff, three deputies, Marley and his two friends sat hidden at the entrance of the hideaway waiting the trio. When the sheriff called on them to surrender as they appeared, they slipped off their animals, got behind boulders and started shooting. Marley was the first victim, but thirty minutes later all three bandits were dead.

—*Simpson M. Ritter.*

Quick Draw

THE breed slid from his mat saddle, slung the pony's reins around the willow railing, and stood long looking at the distant shimmer of dust moving up from the river. He turned and stared through the sunlight at the mule team being led away from the company gig. Again he heard the bootfall on the plank floor of the office and knew that Rance Destinn would be watching him now.

The split-log door shuddered open on its leather hinges and Destinn stood in the narrow rectangle, thumbs hooked high in his wide belt. "Business?" he grated without moving his jaws, and stepped out to the railing. His long tawny hair lay low on his buckskin collar and the breed thought, *What a fine scalp he has.*

"Trade?" the breed asked, and nodded at the empty gig.

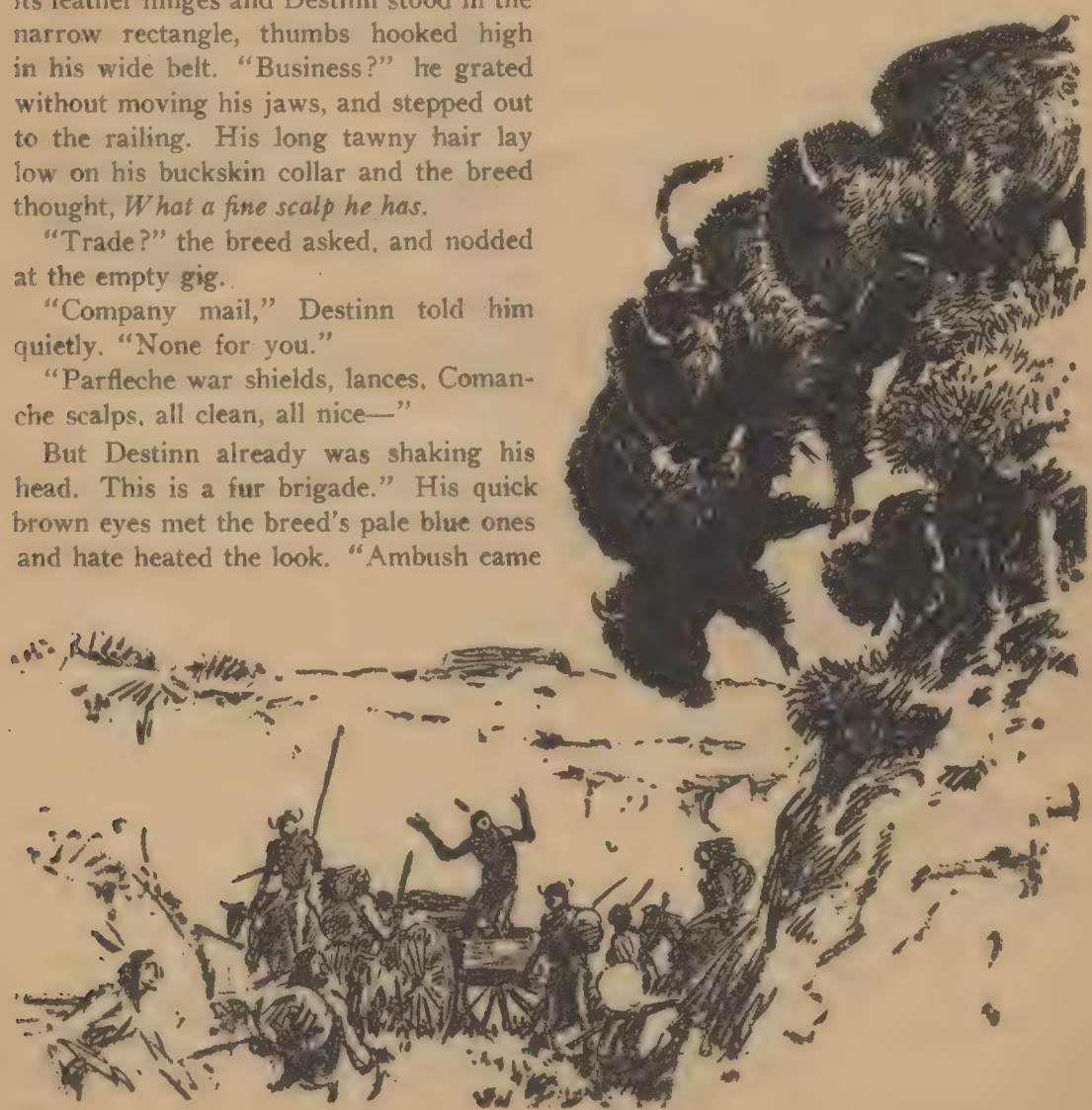
"Company mail," Destinn told him quietly. "None for you."

"Parfleche war shields, lances, Comanche scalps, all clean, all nice—"

But Destinn already was shaking his head. This is a fur brigade." His quick brown eyes met the breed's pale blue ones and hate heated the look. "Ambush came back in the gig from St. Louis. Remember him?" Destinn stepped closer, stepped almost nose-to-nose. "Do you?"

The breed looked away, fingers opening and closing. He wet his thick, cracked lips and sniffed sharply. "He better?"

"They fixed him up proper. Took lead shot from out've his back—his back, I said—and now he's ready to find the people who did it."



Canyon

By GEORGE C. APPELL

"See this buckshot? I just carved it out of one homesteader who was determined to stake out. Now if you're that determined. . . ."

The men in the canyon were facing the nearing herd, stark horror whitening their eyes. . . .

The breed frowned and sniffed again. "Lots buff'lo now. You hunt?"

Destinn eyed the warm sky and tugged his belt up and grinned. "It's spring, isn't it? We can bale forty hides to the pack an' have 'em freighted to St. Louis by June." He lowered his eyes and leveled them on the breed. "Without interference, that is. If there are no interruptions."

The dust smear was halfway from the river to the stockade, and Destinn studied it and judged it and filed it away as being another hell-wagon, one of those liquor-laden carts whose owners swapped whiskey for hides and left the company hunters shaky and sick and poor-sighted with a flintlock.

He decided to run it off, to warn it clear. The hunt would start soon, and Frechette was coming out to joint it. A letter from Frechette was a letter from the Western operations manager, and that manager was a hard-brained man who wanted things perfect. So the hell-wagon must pass by.

"Ambush!" Destinn watched the stable detail roll the gig off the compound. He cocked his head to the lilting chant of the Negro boy rubbing down the mules and side-saw Moon Harper and Jake Turnbull lank their way toward the gates and peer at the approaching wagon. "It won't do, boys," he called. "You'll ride dry this year."

Harper turned and winked. "That's pure Missouri magic in that rig, an' I feel like a wizard."

"The captain's coming. Maybe you'll spirit him off."

"Frechette?" Moon Harper's fuzzy brows crawled together in disgust. "Now, why don't he stay East like he's supposed to do?"

Destinn laughed and walked past the breed and stopped between Harper and Turnbull. "Why don't you and the others hunt sober like you're supposed to do?" And he laughed again and nudged Turnbull. "Jake, the last time you lunged a bull, you were fifty-one per cent drunk and the whole hide got away wounded."

"Fifty, Rance." Jake spat through the open gates. "Half of me said, 'You're drunk,' and half of me said, 'You're sober.' "

"Ambush! But the bull got away—where is that fur-bearing freak?" Rance turned away from the nearing wagon and looked full into the breed's flat face. "You track out, hear? No mail, no orders, no trade." He curved a thumb at the gates. "Now."

"I go." The breed stood silently on moccasined feet, square hands hanging loose. A nervous tongue-wipe dampened his lips; the web of wrinkles ringing his eyes tightened and half-closed the lids. "Stable gate?"

"It's not open. Use this one."

The breed's eyes shifted from Rance's face and focused over his shoulder; words rose in his throat and stuck there.

Jake Turnbull said what the breed knew, "That's no hell-wagon, Rance."

"What else is out this early?" Rance walked through the gates and shaded his eyes with both palms. The thin yellow curtain of dust was half a mile away still, but the sideless wagon bed showed clear behind the plodding horses; the two tired trappers on foot pacing the team did not resemble whiskey-traders.

Then Ambush Ankerson trotted soft-footed from the stables and came up beside Rance. "Did I hear you hollerin'?"

Rance glanced briefly at the lean, wire-limbed old man with the wild red whiskers that sprang across his face from jaw to jaw and made possible the implications in his nickname.

"I was learnin' Mississippi chanteys from thet stable boy, Rance." Ambush worked his jaws once, drew tobacco juice to his tongue and spat between the breed's feet. "He shore can chant."

"You know what I'm goin' to tell Frechette when he comes out?"

"He comin'? Oh, glory be to Andy Jackson!"

"I'm goin' to tell him, 'Cap'n, take this Ankerson and get him shot again, and ship him back East again, only this time—leave him there.' That's what I'll report."

Moon Harper pulled his eyes from the wagon and fixed them on Ambush. "Is it true that in St. Louis they use nap-kings when they drinks likker?"

"The only likker I seen back there was that which lay in the glass in m'hand, an' that's the truth. . . . Look, yonder!"

THE wagon had stopped and one of the trappers was shuffling forward, rifle held low, face down. His ragged elkskins were blotched with the brown stains of dried blood and the fur on his round hat was ripped and patchy. He rested his rifle against the gatepost and raised his eyes to Destinn. His greasy beard wriggled as he tried to speak; he swallowed stiffly, then found his voice. "You want 'em inside?" he husked.

"Want who inside?" Rance flicked his eyes from the trapper to the wagon and back to the trapper. "You're Bart Henry, aren't you?"

"Yep, an' that's muh boy by the team, there." He scratched his beard and fingered his throat and swallowed again.

"You ain't heerd?" And he swung his head toward the wagon.

"Heard what? Say—I thought you were up by the White Castles after beaver."

Bart Henry nodded heavily. "So I was, so I was, but we follered out a crick an' it took us to thet canyon—what's it called? Cully-somethin'—an' we found what we got on the wagon there—wanta look?"

Rance motioned to Ambush to watch the breed, mounted now and ready to leave; and he led the way to the wagon with Harper and Turnbull and Bart Henry behind him. Young Joe Henry's staring eyes and tight mouth prepared them for the sight, and Rance looked once at each corpse, then moved away.

"What canyon?" Rance asked Bart Henry.

"Cully-suck, or somethin'." Henry was weary with days on the trail through treacherous land; weary, beyond that, with years in the mountains and a lifetime of scrabbling and digging and straining to stay alive. He held his hand to his beard, now, and felt fatigue slowly fogging his brain and draining his muscles. "You want 'em inside?" he repeated.

"Cul-De-Sac," Rance breathed. "Cul-De-Sac Canyon, is what the French used to call it. Know it, Moon? A one-way slot in the side of a mountain."

Moon nodded reflectively. "'Bout a quarter-mile in, an' plenty high."

"That's it—inside, Henry." He left the wagon and went past Joe Henry and called over his shoulder, "Show 'em the way to the packing shed, Jake. I'll meet you there." He stalked into the stockade, anger throbbing through him like a fever; he pointed behind him to the gates and, without turning, ordered Moon to close them after the wagon.

"Ambush, assist that breed off his pony an' escort him to the armory."

Frechette would have to be warned now; if the captain came West and were taken by Blackfeet, or if he decided to get help from the Army and that started a prairie war—in any case, the company would suffer and suffer badly. The price of hides would rise and the fashion-conscious East would wonder at the evils of the Western fur outfits and turn elsewhere with its solid dollars.

Rance reached the packing shed as the rigid, rancid corpses were being lifted out; he waited with constricted throat while they were placed on the baling platform. And then he snapped out his knife and bent over the thing that a handful of days before had been a man. "Now, Bart—we'll find out how these people died."

Forty minutes later, he wiped his knife clean, tied the ends of his kerchief to keep safe its contents, and left for the armory with the anger deep in him and burning his brain. He stamped past a spring wagon, newly-arrived, and barely noticed the man and woman on it and ignored their greeting. He kicked open the armory door and banged it shut behind him.

AMBUSH Ankerson, straddling a cleaning bench behind the breed, was whittling with clean, easy scrapes of his knife. He tilted his head at the racks of muskets and winked.

"I figger, Rance, if'n he breaks loose, I'll stretch him with one o' them firin' arns."

"Too bad he didn't try." Rance swung a leg over the bench and put the kerchief down between him and the breed. He untied it and displayed the pile of small lead balls. "Know what they are?"

The breed's deep, wrinkled eyes sank to the kerchief and rose again. "Buckshot?"

"Pretty big for that, aren't they?" Rance picked up a pellet and held it under the breed's nose. "That's a bullet from a Hawken fifty-three. It's a half-

ounce ball propelled by two hundred and eighteen grains of powder."

"Some rifle, Des-teen."

"And the company doesn't use it. The company uses those flintlocks you see on the racks. And the only other weapon carried out here is the Manton, which has twelve balls to the pound and is a custom-made piece which is too damned expensive for trade purposes. Fifty guineas in St. Louis—two hundred and fifty dollars." He dropped the pellet back to the kerchief and hitched closer. "So Hawken rifles killed those settlers. The Blackfeet took 'em into Cul-De-Sac and used 'em hard, then shot 'em with a Hawken. Where did they get it?"

The breed sat straight, eyes nailed to Destinn's face. Outside, the spring wagon creaked past on its way to the stables, and was gone; inside the only sound was the persistent *wheep-wheep-wheep* of Ambush's whittling blade.

The breed moved his chin slightly. "I not know that." His eyes slid left and right, then dropped away.

Rance snapped his fingers. "I can guess where! I can guess they got 'em from some prairie rat who bought 'em off the river trade or had 'em freighted West, cased as beads and tobacco. And I can guess further and say that this prairie rat lives with 'em most o' the time and can swap off his rifles quick so they won't ever be found with him." Rance leaned back and picked up the kerchief and tied it. "What's your guess?"

But this only answer was the shuck of the blade and the tick of wood chips as they fell to the floor.

He rose from the bench and yanked open the door. "All right—track out." He followed the breed into the open and stayed close while he mounted. "I wouldn't show up again if I were you. Our business is buffalo hides, not—not—" Their eyes locked, and the hate was there, and it was flashing and hot. "Track."

The breed booted his pony through the gates and turned onto the river road and jogged away under a camouflage of his own dust.

The gates thumped shut and Rance wheeled abruptly and headed for the stables and the spring wagon. He ran clawed fingers through his long hair and shook out his shirt as the man and the woman turned and smiled.

"Hullo," Rance gruffed. "Sorry I didn't have time before."

"My name's Cobb," the man said. He wore a curly brown beard but his hair was cropped short. "This is my wife."

Rance took in the lined face and the red, knobby knuckles and the once-tan shoes that were broken and black with time. "Homesteading?" he asked suddenly.

"That's right," Cobb answered proudly. "We ran our place in Ohio to rocks, so we thought we'd try the West." He smiled at his wife. "Didn't we?"

She nodded and palmed her work-seamed hands and sighed. "They say it's fine land beyond the river."

"I wouldn't try it," Rance told Cobb. "Go on back to Ohio."

"Lissen, mister, we come all this way to stake out, an' we're staying. No fur brigadier's goin' to scare me off."

"I don't speak for myself or the company, Cobb. It's Blackfeet." He arched an arm across the air. "They're all over hell—pardon, ma'am—an' they're armed with Hawkens. No arrows." He thrust out the kerchief. "See that shot? I just carved it out of two other 'steaders who tried to stake out." Rance, watching the Cobbs' doubting faces, thought of his own family back East and of how he'd react if they showed up in the fur country. "You better pull foot, Cobb. We can't protect you, and there's no troops out here."

Cobb waited till the Negro boy had finished greasing his axles. "No Black-

foot with a Hawken or anythin' else can scare me. We're stakin'."

"A bullet has no brains—it goes where it's sent. There's a hunter here now who got shot in the back last winter, and he'll verify that."

Cobb gathered rein and released the brake; he tossed a dollar to the boy and nodded. "All right, mister. Thanks for the advice." He turned his team and hauled it down long enough to add, "We come too far to go back now." And he popped whip and drove toward the gate.

Ambush stood by the armory door watching them go, and after a moment he approached Rance and blinked querulously.

"They don't seem to care none."

"Guess not—see to those people in the packing shed, Ambush. Bury 'em deep, and be glad you're not ahead of 'em in the ground."

Moon Harper followed him into the office and sat cross-legged in a corner, thoughtfully champing tobacco. He rose once to spit through a tear in the paper windowpane, then squatted once more and crossed his boots. "What do you figger, Rance?"

"The breed? We can't prove anything." He frowned at his fingertips. "It's him, though. And he's passing out rifles from one point. He couldn't get around to all the villages with a hundred guns, so the villages come to him."

"Come where?"

Rance shrugged and ran his hands back over his hair. "Some place not too open, I guess."

"Cully-suck, mebbe?"

They looked at each other sharply. "The ol' Cul-De-Sac, now. Well, Moon—" He grinned, wincing. "That's what I'm in—a *cul-de-sac*. My back to the wall, an' no way out. Frechette'll come, claim the company's name won't be worth hide tallow when the news gets out, an' hand me the sack."

Moon smiled smugly. "The *cul-de-sac*, huh?"

They sat without speaking as the afternoon purpled to twilight and the room grew dim; they listened to the hunters in the armory beyond the wall cleaning flintlocks; and finally Rance reached for the candlestick and stuck a taper in it and lighted it. "Moon."

"Yuh have my ear."

"That breed didn't think those bodies'd ever be found, did he?"

"He shore sweat when that wagon come up the rud."

"Well, what'll we do about it?"

Moon uncrossed his boots and stood up and squirted a mighty splash through the pane. "We're buffler hunters, not sojers."

"That's just it—we've got to be our own army now."

"With what?" Moon drawled. "Buffler?"

Rance stared hard at him, his features trenched in shadows that lengthened and shortened and swayed. "Maybe that." He lifted the candlestick and held it high.

CAPTAIN FRECHETTE hopped from the gig that had carried him from the river and clapped gloved hands at the stable boy.

"My horse is behind, there. Rub him down." He greeted Rance Destinn with a quick handshake. "Crossed in bullboats. God! Shaky things." The captain's darting black eyes and thin moustaches made him look to Rance like an early cavalier.

"Just in time for lunch, captain."

"It'll taste good!" Frechette quick-stepped to the armory and inspected the flintlocks; he circled the cookhouse and found some manure and directed that it be removed; he went through the packing shed and tested the baling platform and, going out, stopped and sniffed. "What's that?"

Rance told him. "We buried 'em yesterday."

"Who were they?"

"Settlers."

"Ha! Any more out?"

"One couple. Left a day ago to stake."

"Ha!" Frechette sniffed again. "Should have kept them here, Destinn! Should have kept them here!"

Rance trotted alongside the captain, lunch-bound. "I tried, but they wouldn't listen."

"Trying's not enough," Frechette said sharply.

The brigade hunters waited till Frechette and Rance had helped themselves to boiled beaver tail and buffalo cuts and steamed prairie root; then they filed past the pots and ladled out their own lunch.

"Trying's not enough!" Frechette barked between hastp gulps. His eyes jumped to Rance. "Can't understand a factor like you failing! Have to protect settlers. Part of our agreement." He finished his meal and pulled on his gloves. "Horses ready? All in order?"

"Ready to ride, captain."

"Dawn, then. We ride at dawn. It'd best be a successful hunt, Destinn." He let the warning of his words impact itself as he tightened his green cravat. "What's this about rifles?"

"Someone's been distributing Hawkens to the Blackfoot villages."

"Ha! Which gives them plenty of powder to kill whom they choose, what?"

"Correct," Rance groaned. He thought again of his family, and wondered how he could support them if he got the sack. He decided to change the subject. "It was good to see Ankerson."

"The redbeard? Saw him in St. Louis. Cost the company fifty-four dollars for hospital. Who else have you got?"

"Harper, Turnbull, Willoughby, and Sinnott. Ankerson's still patching and can't hunt till summer."

"Four hunters, then. Five with you, six with me." The captain pinched a moustache end with fast fingers. "Destinn, I want a hundred and fifty carcasses in two days."

Rance looked strangely at Frechette. "This'll be a calf hunt, captain. The bulls and cows'll be stringy just now."

"I know it! But calves bale up same as the others. Full of grama grass by now, and healthy." He spanked his gloves together. "I've been out from the States before, Destinn. I was a factor, just like you."

After a pause, Rance took a breath and grunted, "Yes, sir." And followed with, "Dawn then. We'll rendezvous at dawn."

"Dawn, Mr. Destinn, is distinctly what I said!"

They rode single-file through the gates in the weakening star-glow and headed for the river, which they'd follow into the coulee country where the small spring herds would be searching for water and fattening themselves on the lush grama. Rance led them on ahead of the clumsy wagon and by mid-morning they were far aflank of the White Castles and bearing southwest across the river valley for the prairie flats that met the water again at its big bend. At noon, they stopped to water and cinch up; and at two o'clock Jake Turnbull's space-whetted eyes sighted dust and he called it a herd. The hunters rodded home charges and put extra ball in their mouths; reloading from the saddle left little time to search a shot pouch.

Frechette waved them into a wide-riding approach and they spurred into a gallop and fanned toward the dust in a semi-circle; then Rance, riding center, spat the ball from his mouh and held up a hand. "Hold, here!"

"Ha?" The captain skidded his horse and glared. "Why halt, Destinn? They'll give us a helluva chase!"

"That's not a herd," Rance snapped. Turnbull came over and squinted fiercely.

"No—it ain't. It's smoke."

THEY closed in and picked up their gallop again and rode with their thighs, reins limp and boots out. Jake Turnbull arrived at the scattered char first and dropped from the saddle and stepped gingerly into the light smoke.

"Damnation!" he said hoarsely, "Come here, Rance."

They found a once-tan shoe that was broken now with time and fire; and farther on they came on the woman's body. Cobb's twisted corpse lay broken across the mouth of a gopher hole.

"Should have held them, Destinn!" a voice breathed.

Rance whirled away from Cobb's body, knife out, fringed cuffs blood-soaked. "Here, Frechette! The Hawken fifty-three again! Take it east to the States for a souvenir!"

He slung the half-ounce shot at the startled captain and mounted. "Willoughby! Start digging two graves. The wagon'll be up in half an hour and the skinners can help you finish."

They cantered toward the coulees at the big bend of the river, flintlocks held muzzles-up, thighs tight; the long bulge of the steep hill at their right was receiving the set of the sun when Turnbull, again, sighted herd. They fell apart into a thin circle and closed down at the gallop, musket butts to armpits, eyes wet to the lash of the wind.

A hair-shed bull bellowed an alarm and the herd bobbed into movement and flowed south ahead of the charge. yellow humps and tan briskets and black rumps massed over the prairie for half a mile, and gradually swung toward the right, away from the water.

"Fence 'em toward that hill!" Frechette screamed. "They'll never go up it!" He bumped his musket against his saddle to seat the charge and pulled the piece to his shoulder.

Then they were in the dust of the drumming herd, galloping hard, closing in; and Frechette, centering the chase with Rance at his right, flung out an arm and shouted something and shouted again to make himself heard. The words came faint over the booming of four hundred hoofs, but Rance heard them: "The canyon—head 'em away from the canyon!"

And they all knew, suddenly, that once into the one-way slot in the hill, no calf could be cut out from the cows and no dressing would be done and the spring hunt would start on a stymied note and might, conceivably, die with the day.

Moon Harper waved his musket in understanding of Rance's signal and fisted his horse off to the right to ride up the hill ahead of the herd and stampede it away from Cul-De-Sac; Rance stabbed spurs and raced up left to outflank the leading bulls and blind them off with the flap of a blanket or the smoke of a fire.

His plunging horse fought up the hill

Edward Mann*

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around the rim of the canyon and stumbled once, recovered, and plunged on until Rance reined down and held him in. Below on the flat land the herd was spreading toward the slot-mouth in the side of the hill, wild and raging and berserk with fright and the primitive instinct of escape to cover. Close behind the straggling calves was Frechette, firing now, and Turnbull and Sinnott were riding at the gallop.

Then Rance Destinn, yanking free his cantle-roll to fan away the bulls, saw the men in the canyon under his feet. They were facing the nearing herd, and stark horror whitened their eyes and sent sweat to their copper skins and one, wrinkle-eyed and thick-mouthed, began to prance up and down on a spring wagon and point to the sides of Cul-De-Sac.

Moon Harper, on the opposite rim, cupped his hands to yell, but Rance batted a hand and signaled him back down the slope.

He forgot his cantle-roll as he spurred toward the herd and laughed to the wind and slid his horse sideways down the slope and found footing again on the flats. And he aimed steadily at the flash of a yellow bull and sent a ball through the brisket.

The deafening blast of four hundred hooves weaved away from the rolling bull and pounded into Cul-De-Sac, and the deepening sky was filled with the noise and the dust of their passing. A single, high screech rose from the canyon; then the hooves shook its sides with cannon-like echoes and the calves bobbed in and Frechette and Turnbull and Sinnott were alone in the spinning haze on the dusty prairie.

The captain side-stepped his foam-rilled horse up to Rance and his eyes drilled hard as he blurted, "You a factor?" The sleek little moustache was pale with dust and it twitched as he choked, "You're not even a hunter!" An anger-shaken glove, black with dampness, quivered toward Cul-De-Sac. "You sent 'em in there! I saw you!"

Moon Harper trotted across from the right hand rise and winked at Turnbull and Sinnott. "Cap'n Rance just ee-lim'-nated all yore troubles."

"He what?" The word was a wondering bleat.

Moon looked airy. "Wal-l, we got our own army now, the U-nited States not supplyin' same. I reckon we'll hunt south o' here for some while, an' when we comes by this way agin, cap'n, that herd'll be out o' Cully-Suck. An' if you care to peer in there, you'll see the flat remains o' some very pretty Hawkens rifles, 'long with their owners." He rolled his eyes with satisfaction, and passed a knowing wink to Rance.

They filed back to the camp-site near the graves where the wagon waited, moving at a restful walk; Rance and Frechette rode side by side, but only when they saw Willoughby's all-clear signal and smelled the scent of the cook fires did the captain speak. "What's the name of that place, Destinn?"

"Cully-suck, the trappers call it. It's Cul-De-Sac on the landform map."

Moon Harper cleared his throat. "An' Rance is shore happy to be out o' it."

Frechette smiled for the first time in three days. "It's not often a man can solve his problems with his back to the wall."

"That depends on th' man, cap'n," Moon chuckled.

"Yes, it does." They circled the cook fire and dismounted by the picket line. "Takes a good man to be a factor, eh, Destinn?" The captain removed his green cravat and whipped dust from it. "A most successful hunt, I'd say."

And his wink so disconcerted Rance that he almost stopped thinking about bringing his family out West for the summer.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 99)

HERE'S your chance to show how much you know about cowpunchers and the open range country. Below are listed twenty questions . . . Western brain teasers, all of them. See how many you can call the turn on. Answer eighteen or more, and you're in the buckaroo class for sure. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're good. Answer fewer than fifteen, however, and you're fast crowding in with the greenhorns. Good luck!

1. If a puncher acquaintance of yours told you he was planning to go "mavericking," you should: Turn him in to the sheriff? Offer to go along? Wish him luck, and offer to lend him your stamping (branding) iron?

2. If you had "Mexican strawberries" for dinner, what would you have eaten?

3. Give two meanings for the Western slang term, "larrup."

4. "Lamp oil" is the Western slang expression which means: Chinese cook? Whiskey? Water from the *Rio Grande* . . . so-called because of its thickness?

5. What is a "horn string," and what is its purpose?

6. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a "hooligan wagon" is: A portable jail? A wagon used to carry fuel and water? A very large and conspicuously ornamented Western-type saddle?

7. True or false? "Hog-leg" is a slang expression which came to mean any large type of pistol (of the pioneer type).

8. If the ranch boss sent you out to bring in a "high-line rider," you should: Gather your friends about you and go after him? Seek out the man who fixes the ranch windmills? Prepare for a holiday in town?

9. When are cattle said to be "herd broke?"

10. True or false? A "hide-out gun" is a weapon—usually a second one—which is hidden on one's person . . . just in case.

11. What Arizona river is said, according to legend, to make a liar for life out of anybody who takes a drink from it?

12. According to Western terminology, what is a "head catch?"

13. If an animal is said to be grass-bellied, it is: Thin? Fat?

14. If the ranch boss sent you to fetch a "gouch hook," you should: Head for the kitchen? Head for the barn? Head for the Mexican border?

15. If a cowpuncher friend mentioned a "go-easter," you would: Prepare for a tornado? Wish the friend a nice trip? Tell him he should stick to cowpunching and stay out of the poultry business?

16. Which is the "git-up-end" of a horse?

17. True or false? A "flower rowel" is a type of spur having a rowel shaped somewhat like a flower.

18. What does "forging" mean when the term is applied to a horse?

19. True or false? The term, "fogging," means "traveling at high speed."

20. True or false? A "flash rider" is a cowpuncher who likes to show off.

CHAPTER ONE

The Red Run

HE WAS a tall and angular man, economical of movement, with a quality of lightning in his sun-bleached eyes and wide mouth. He was Oneshot Giles, the Chatham "army," glacial of emotion, steel hard of judgment, merciless of personal opinion as of action. No one had ever found a gentleness in him except his horse, and Chatham's daughter, but almost more than her pa, he had raised her.

She was a blonde, with the dark burn of southern suns upon frank and open features, vital and compact of mould, and dressed in antelope trail clothes. She stood a few feet behind him beneath the leaky tarpaulin stretched out from a trail wagon, hands behind her, warming toward the low fire that stung its damp acrid smoke beneath the canvas.

For the moment, she was idle.

It was late on this cold and sullen west-

Bull was literally crippling Townsend in berserk fury when Chatham ordered the bunch to gang him off. . . .

BULLET BREED

"Yo're shiftless and useless and proud on top of it! But you'll make a ramrod—if you can tame a bully as well as you tame those bulls. . . ."

By T. C. McCLARY

Nebraska afternoon and she peered out into the raw, wet gray of the valley and watched the dark mass of the weary herd thrust uncertainly through the forming and rifting sea of fine drizzle and torn mists and the low clouds shredding upon the prairie's land swells.

Beyond sight, her father's deep chested voice barked, raw and harsh, over the sucking clop of twenty thousand hoofs. Instantly, the prairie came alive with yips and yaks and the drum of running hoofs, as the boys began to fan the herd out upon the holding ground. There was no dallying with that hard anger in Chad Chatham's tone; behind it lay eleven hundred miles of trouble trail with three days of soaking rain at the end, and then this stampede, the day before loadup at nearby Ogallala.

The herd had run off ten or twenty thousand pounds of beef, and there would be no time to graze it on again. Cattle would come sick that night from the heavy sweatup in this weather, and the whole herd would be weak and shaky for its long standing trip to the stockyards at Chicago. This was just one reason cattle went begging at a dollar a head on the Nueces, when they brought upward of twenty at the beef terminal.

"Pa don't sound atall happy about things," she muttered.

Humor moved the corners of Giles's wide, slit lips. "He sure ain't going to buy the boys a barrel of whiskey on it!"

he agreed as he looked at the girl.

A sharp attentiveness came into the girl's face. A rider on a fast horse came hightailing down a slope to fence off a bunch of strays. It was the Canyon Kid, and he rode free and easy, part of his horse, so that a man thought of them as one.

Midway down the slope he dragged rein as Chatham's foreman, Bull Vogel, galloped out of a patch of fog. Vogel cursed him roughly from a distance, and the Kid put his animal back into movement, but something had happened inside him. The spirit had gone out of him and he rode sullenly, almost with a greenhorn's uncertainty and self-consciousness.

Vogel was a bullying brute of savage cruelty and black pride of authority. He had hated the Kid's guts for what he considered a personal affront in refusing to hire out when Chatham needed him, and then the Kid's underhanded trickery in showing up for the drive with a measly herd of forty-five steers—enough to give him the privileges of a private owner. Bull had sworn to break him and make him crawl or quit, and had heaped dirty work and ridicule and criticism on the Kid at every chance he got.

Bull had begun by driving the Kid off from the main chuck fire at the outset, and all the way up no man had spoken to the Kid except to curse him or rawhide him or deride him for something wrong. The natural trail losses for the herd had been heavy in any case, but the Kid had suffered out of all proportion. It was Giles's opinion that Bull Vogel had aided natural causes by such tricks as miring two of the Kid's herd in quicksands at the Red.

GILES thought of that now, but it was a thought that passed with utter indifference across the hardness of his mind. Personally, he wouldn't dirty his hands with cattle, but if he did, no man would lay a hand or spook on one without getting a bullet in the head. Giles was a man completely cold of judgement and callous of opinion except where it concerned himself—a man's first job in life was somehow to come out on top. He was not touched by the Kid's dogged stubbornness; the Kid should not have come, or he should have found a way to win respect.

The girl said, with a woman's mixed note of sympathy and indignation, "Aw, look at that, Oneshot, the boys ain't even left him his self-confidence—and pa's just as bad!"

He grunted, "He ain't done much to rate it, Gail." It was a careless commentary, a simple answer, but then he caught the echo of something deep and stirred in the girl's voice. He flicked a sharp glance at her, and suddenly guessed the story and this matter grew damned personal to him.

He could see now that Chatham had let the Kid come just to let circumstances shame him before the girl, being of the opinion himself that the Kid was shiftless and fiddlefooted, hiding a lack of spunk behind his big blow of upbreeding the wild stringy Nueces ladinos and bringing in some Angus and Hereford stock to cross.

This changed things. A man might swallow a heap of dirt and eat a lot of humble pie to save his chances with a girl like Gail. If he really knew what he was up to and had the gumption to carry through. If he didn't, then the harsher his shaming and the quicker, the better for the girl.

The girl said miserably, "He ain't yellow, Oneshot. He's just kind of wild and shy and don't know what to do, except that somehow he's got to get his critters through to Chicago to get a stake of real money."

Giles frowned and spoke out into the rain, "Forty-five steer ain't much to show

for five years' work when a man can ride himself in a thousand head from across the border."

"Aw, he don't want to get 'em that way," the girl murmured. "And he's been busy selecting and breeding and culling, and not just herding. He's figured now he's built his breed stock, and this trip would just give him enough money to bring in some blooded stock to cross."

"You know what a good bull's worth?" Giles queried.

"He aimed to bring in heifers and build the slower way," she said.

It was the slower way, all right, but it was better than nothing, and something a man could do with a few dollars—he didn't know why it wouldn't work at that. That is, it might work if a man really knew how to work cattle, but he had never seen a real cattleman who'd take a pushing around. Then there was the old man's solid realistic view of matters, even if the boy were on the level—why worry with upbreeding a stock that needed care and attention when every rancher on the Nueces was bankrupt with tough ladino stock he couldn't sell? The weight of the argument fell, naturally, to a man who had proven he had the gumption and savvy to gather and handle a decent spread of cows; on that basis, it looked as if the Kid were just full of wind.

Oneshot's gaze narrowed out into the thickening gray light, following the Kid's ghostlike form through the churning mists. Not often, but sometimes, appearances miscolored a man. The test was in how a man acted under a rotten streak of luck when the break came.

The Kid sat tall in the saddle, wide in the shoulders and flat in the hips, not a big man against the iron muscled giants of the Nueces breed, but with the effortless, tireless vitality of a wild animal, and the limberness of a rawhide whip. In years and build, he was full man, but either shyness or short experience or soft innards had held him from attaining the needed toughness.

The girl murmured with deep disturbance, "Aw, give him a break, Oneshot!"

"That ain't enough," he told her thoughtfully. "This something he's got to do hisself. But I'll study on it."

The main camp lay close by the metallic sheen of the swollen creek below. The cook had thrown big split pitch poles on the fire when the herd neared, and now they were clearing of their thick wet smoke and putting a roaring blaze against the deepening grey dusk. Riders came drifting in, cold and stiff and sullen of temper, snappy as coyotes over their java.

Bull Vogel rode in alone, rough and tough and rangy of movements, two hundred pounds of solid beef and bone. He shouldered a waddy roughly aside at the fire, nasty-humored, looking for trouble, raw and edged and meaning to show his authority. He poured a cup of boiling hot coffee from the big pot on the fire, and had just taken his first draught when the Kid rode in from the gathering gloom.

The Kid ground-hitched and stepped out of the saddle, self-conscious at the instantly truculent attention turned on him, awkward in the way of a man wanting coffee and warmth but knowing no man at that fire would make an inch of room. He tipped water out of his hat brim, rubbed his hands briskly and moved to the bucket for a dipper of water.

"Why didn't he come up here?" the girl demanded half of herself. "He's an owner; he don't have to mix at their fire. Oh, the danged stubborn fool!"

Giles watched curiously, noting the sudden determined stiffening of the Kid's shoulders, the decision in the way he turned around. He had the dipper half raised to his lean face, and he spoke it above it, tight of voice, but clear and distinct. He said to Bull, "You had no cause

to shoot at those three steers of mine!"

Vogel pivoted slowly on one heel at the fire, staring, bullet-head jutted forward, wicked anticipation breaking through the surprise upon his cruel, thick-fleshed face. "Why you damned crawling, whining jack!" he suddenly exploded. "You've got the nerve to tell me what I should do."

His big, flatbacked hand came out suddenly, sloshing hot coffee and water from the Kid's dipper up into his face. He took his tin cup and banged it at the Kid's jaw as hard as he could throw, anger building in his voice like the roar of a tornado.

The Kid fell back a half step, his face paling, jaw set, but the look in his eye of a man trying to figure precisely what to do. He toted a derelict single-shot antique horse pistol that would blow the side out of a barn or serve as a club, but he did not even think of it; he still held the dipper like a big spoon.

On the hill above, the girl breathed on a torn note, "Oneshot, he don't know how to tangle with a sidewinder like Bull!"

"Well he is sure going to learn—the hard way!" Giles grunted dryly.

Bull's anger reached the boiling point, and he jerked off his hat and slammed it on the ground. His muscles gathered to put him moving forward.

HOOFBEATS sounded and Chad Chatham rode into the circle of light, cutting sign on the scene instantly. His question popped on a curt note of authority, "What's going on here?"

Bull's body leaned forward, as if frozen between his lust for cruelty and respect for the rangelord. He pulled his big body back into line slowly; he brought his temper in hand in the way of a man tugging on a big press.

"Nothing much but a little lesson this hombre's needing, boss," Bull finally growled. "He's got the nerve to question why I shot three of his steers when it was his own bunch spooked off the stampede!"

"They weren't even leading—" the Kid started to holler, then yammered soundlessly and finally closed his mouth under the gathering violence of Chatham's eyes.

"It was his bunch started the trouble?" he demanded with a tone so quiet it sounded lethal.

Bull moved in his boots and jerked his head sidewise across the fire. "Ask Lanky—he's been big-brothering the Kid!"

That was somewhat an overstatement, but more important to Chatham, Lanky would state the blunt truth.

Lanky darkened and spat uncomfortably into the fire. "Well, boss, the Kid's bunch were sure under full steam when they come by me, and the others with 'em were just getting started."

Chatham sucked a deep lungful of air and whistled it through his teeth into the taut silence. "Kid," he rasped, "I will give you Ogallala price for all the steers you started with and you can clear out now!"

The Kid turned crimson and hung his head, but he was stubborn and muttered brokenly, "Thanks, Mr. Chatham, but I reckon I'll just take what I've got left."

Chatham nodded with a brusque gesture of finality and grunted with contempt, "Shiftless and useless and proud on top of it! You won't get half the money. All right, get 'em cut out by the time we're ready to start the herd moving tomorrow."

He wheeled his horse uphill, leaving the boys smirking, and Bull chuckling with malicious satisfaction, and the Kid looking miserable enough to bawl. The rain was coming heavier again and light was already dim, and after this, the Kid couldn't spend the night in camp, and couldn't move his herd until dawn. And if the Kid didn't come right smack at daybreak, some of those doggies were going to be mighty hard to locate!

Bull chuckled wickedly, "Why, mister

private owner, I'll be up with the morning star to see to yo're cut out. Yessir, I aim to give yore bunch my pussonal attention in the morning!"

"Don't go worrying on my herd none!" the Kid rasped sullenly, and swung into his saddle and rode off into the dark.

Chad Chatham came up to his trail wagon and tied to a wheel, pausing to glare at his daughter before going in to change his clothes and warm up with a drink of whiskey. "Injuns, floods, electric storms, drytrails, rustlers and a windblow weren't bad enough!" he snapped. "I had to let you talk me into bringing that useless cow nester along atop of it!"

She had some of her father's temper too. She bit right back at him, "That ain't even fair, pa, and you know it! It wasn't his fault that stampede broke!"

"It was his cows, and that's enough!" her father rasped. He stopped in his tracks to regard her sharply. "What in pot makes a woman so mule-stubborn she can't see when a man ain't got the innards and makings of a rancher? If he'd been watching his herd and it weren't plumb wild and man shy it wouldn't have spooked!"

Her temper drained into black misery under the lash of his harsh authority. "He didn't do it, though!" she muttered brokenly.

"Well, mebbe he didn't, but he let two of his own critters get bogged in quicksands at the Red for fear of swiming alongside them, and then he was scared to rope 'em free until the whole danged herd got across!" Her father broke off, coming suddenly conscious of her heart, and scowling, blew against his lips. He shook his head, as if reviewing his judgment and sure of the fairness of his decision. He said on a different note, "If he had any innards, or any cattle sense, either one, mebbe I wouldn't be so harsh. But he is just a heap of wind and trouble with no spunk; the Nueces will be better off without him."

He moved by her to the wagon, and the girl stood as if her heart were breaking. Her pa had just taken Bull's word on the quicksands, same as he'd taken it on this, and now the Kid was riding off into darkness, and he'd be out and gone with dawn, and she'd never even see him again to tell him at least she didn't blame him!

"Bull's the bag of wind anyway!" she murmured moltenly. "How could he tell what cows spooked first in this rain when there wasn't even reason for his watching 'em?"

At the edge of the canvas, Giles lifted his head sharply, as if trying to catch a sound that had already died out. Come to think of it, she had something. The herd had been dead weary and low spirited from the weather, and there had been no lightning nor thunder nor any other thing

to cause close watching of the herd, and that rain and mist had been peasoup thick when the stampede got started off.

She looked over beseechingly at Giles. "Oneshot," she whimpered, "you can do anything—"

"Now don't go crowding me," he scowled. "I ain't set my mind on the Kid yet, and yore pa sounds like there ain't much left to do in any case."

Without turning, he could feel the last dim hope flickering inside her, and with it a black disillusionment with men. It had been a long day since anyone made him self-conscious, but she did, and he rasped finally, "Well, lemme see how things stack up anyway."

CHAPTER TWO

Color of a Gizzard

HIS horse had its head stuck under the tarpaulin and he wheeled it and swung into the saddle. He rode down to the boys' camp and stepped to the ground and moved in toward the fire for java and to hear the palaver. Bull was boasting, criticizing, swaggering and blowing his own trumpet, and twice, scoffed away the importance of what started the stampede to tell about his play in the windup.

Giles gave him his time, waited for a pause in conversation and, during a silence, allowed speculatively, "You reckon the sidewinders are half fish up here?"

Bull turned his attention on him and Giles saw a watchfulness, a carefulness, close down through his eyes. "They'd have been all fish in that pond we turned the critters in!" he grunted forcingly. "When that big master come splashing through—"

"I was figuring what started 'em off," Giles broke in.

Vogel's eyes went hard and secret, but he made a play of snorting, "Hell—them spooky critters can smell trouble ahead for them! They jist decided to make tracks back to Texas!"

"I reckon they had cause to spook," Lanky allowed out of his usual silence. "One of 'em must have horned up an old sack—he was toting it like a banner when they come busting by my station."

Giles spat thoughtfully into the fire. "Funny you didn't see that, Bull."

Vogel stiffened. Truculence came up through him like a sound, but was blocked off roughly. A man was damned careful the way he breasted Giles! "What's so funny?" he demanded. "You couldn't see yore hand in that rain and fog!"

Giles lifted his face and looked at him. Mockery made a sudden play of bright light upon the surfaces of his eyes. "That thick?" he asked, and saw Vogel pale before muscle bunched along his jaws and he darkened.

A stampede took about nothing flat to start and spread, and except for some unusual observation, such as Lanky's, you wouldn't know where it started unless you were right on top of it. The deduction was that either Vogel would have seen that horned sack, or for some reason was hiding knowledge of it; or else he had no sure knowledge that it had been the Kid's bunch that started things, and he had used the excuse simply to shut off question of why he'd shot three of the Kid's steers.

"What you aiming to do, Giles?" the foreman rasped, but he was careful not to throw affront at the gun king. "Lanky says the same thing I do, only he knew more about it!"

"I was just wondering about you seeing the Kid's bunch so good out of all them five thousand cattle," Giles grunted.

Vogel's head tossed boastfully. He snorted, "You won't see the day anything happens in my herd that I don't know it!"

"Oh, I ain't disputing that!" Giles told him. But his eyes continued to hold that

mockery, and Vogel was damned glad at the irritated call that came from the herd riders for relief so they could come in for coffee.

Giles grinned and after a space rode back into the taut silence of the owner's camp, and hunkered down while the tight-lipped girl got supper ready. The old man was dry dressed and sat on the wagon tongue scowling, feeling the bitter accusation in her and squirming under it, but not changed in his opinion.

He grunted Giles into the wagon to offer a warm-up drink finally and, standing under the smoky lantern glow demanded, "Oneshot, you think I was wrong in what I did?"

Giles made a gesture. "It ain't for me to say, boss. I reckon the Kid's given you other reasons."

"If he had the gizzard of an ant," Chad Chatham growled, "Or if he knew the first damned thing about cattle—But I'm damned if I believe he even knows how they're born. He just ain't got sense or gumption enough to know anything!"

It was clear to see that Chatham was snarled up in a father's way at his daughter's feeling that he was unjust, and only looking for some agreement with his opinion that would make him feel right with himself. He wasn't going to change his decision anyway, and in spite of his hunch that Bull had planted that bag on the horns of the Kid's herd, Giles wasn't sure that he didn't agree with Chatham.

He said, "Well, right or wrong, boss, yo're a hard but not a mean man, and as long as the Kid didn't prove up with you, that's the end of it, ain't it?"

Chad Chatham nodded adamantly. That was the thing he had needed to hear, and he led the way back outside. Bull came up to talk about some of the boys riding in to town and Chatham told him, "Yore business. But you be sure that herd's well guarded!"

Bull's rough face crinkled with a grin. He pulled at his belts and arched his chest. "Boss, if they can't steal 'em from me on the Nueces, they can't up here! I'd know if one of their horns was missing!"

BULL went away and the gray dusk faded into thick pitch night, and after a spell they had a silent supper and, seeing that the old man was going to work on some papers, Giles rode into town over a trail so dark he could not see it ahead of him. He thought about the Kid, giving him a grudging credit for having dared speak up to Bull, but not giving him much sense in the head for the way he'd handled it, and more and more inclined to agree with the Old Man. The man who tied onto the Chatham brand did not necessarily have to be toughest and hardest hombre in the world, but he did have to know how to play his cards to win, and how to handle cattle, and have a man's fill of gumption and good sense.

It was still wet, but the dampness was more mist than rain, and he topped a rim to look down upon the lurid glow of Ogallala, where the trail from Texas and the railhead met. Giles's feelings were still with the girl and his mind still on the Kid, and he played a game of monte with himself as to whether he would find the Kid dead drunk, or going berserk with bitter humiliation, or selling his herd for nothing out of spite, or moping in some hayloft with crying pity for himself.

It took him four hours to find the Kid, and then it was by accident; the Kid had gotten himself a job bedding cattle cars with straw at two bits an hour. By cattle country standards this was enormous pay, but likewise by cattle country standards, for a cowboy—particularly an owner—to stoop to that kind of hired work was lower than any of the possibilities Giles had thought of.

Giles sat close by, watching the Kid work under the big hissing flares, with a harsh contempt in his face and a final, solid agreement with the old man. He could feel the Kid busting with shame and misery inside, but the fact that he contained it touched Giles's harsh judgment with no least shading of respect.

The Kid stopped finally to cool off and catch his breath, leaning on his fork and sending a sullen, defiant glance across at Giles. Giles said on a thin note, "If you needed money to get drunk, they'd have given it to you against yore herd at any bar!"

The Kid turned beet red beneath his burn, but he flung back angrily, "I ain't doing this to get drunk. I'm doing it to make me shipping money to Chicago!"

The information stopped Giles in his tracks. That much stubborn persistence had not occurred to him. He studied the Kid afresh, seeing the signs of cleanness and gentleness and thoughtfulness that would mean much to a woman, and do much to make her happy. It was just too damned bad the Kid didn't have a little more spunk, or a little more cattle savvy.

Giles half lifted his reins to leave the yard. He grunted, "Well, I'll mention in the right place what you was aiming at. But you aim to find any of yore herd left atall, Kid, you'd best be out there by first streak of light!"

"Don't fret on me none," the Kid ground out smolderingly. "I done took my cattle with me."

Giles stopped his horse in mid movement and stared at the Kid. "You what?"

"I done circled the hill after I got to thinking and got me my thirty-one critters out and took 'em with me," the Kid told him. His voice was raw. He was damned near ready to bawl.

"By gawdamighty, that is something I'd have to see!" Giles grunted. There had been riders on the herd, and no great racket of rain or rushing water to gobble the inevitable noise of cutting part of a herd out. Also, it must have still been gray light.

The Kid stiffened, and an almost heartbreaking hurt flamed in his eyes. "You too, Oneshot!" he crackled. "You've all been down on me since the start. You won't even believe me now."

"Simmer down," the older man soothed him. If it was true, he didn't want to call the Kid a liar. He simply couldn't see how the Kid could get those doggies out of a guarded herd with nobody knowing. "It's just good sense," he added. "If you took yore herd out and any of the old man's cows stray tonight, you'll be holding the bag on it, Kid."

The Kid looked at the ground and some of his wild, tearing hurt simmered out of him. "Bull would danged sure see to that," he nodded. He got his horse and made a dicker with the yard boss, and rode Giles out through the pitch darkness to a big draw in the land swells and, combing the air with his head, told Giles, "They're over yonder."

Giles prided himself upon his nightsight and his hearing, but peering against that wall of solid darkness, he could see no blur, hear no slightest movement.

"They ain't sick either," the Kid added half defiantly.

"How do you know?"

"Can't you smell 'em? That sick smell ain't in there," the Kid said.

Giles looked around at the cut of his silhouette against the lesser darkness. If this wasn't a goose chase, he was beginning to respect the Kid. In fifteen minutes, he caught the low snort of a steer, and the Kid sang in to them, quieting them with low rambling talk. They rode in on the critters and Giles could see them now, and circling the bunch twice to make dead sure, counted thirty-one of them.

He stopped by the Kid and felt like a

damned fool blurting a question to which he knew the Kid was going to give some dirt simple answer. "How in hell," he demanded, "did you cut that bunch out in half light without getting any wrong cattle and without raising any kind of a rumpus?"

"I rode in and led the master out was all," the Kid told him glumly, staring straight ahead.

"You—led him out?" Giles repeated, unbelieving.

"Yeah, I took him by the horn and led him out and his herd trailed him," the Kid rasped. His voice was rising with a fresh burst of rawness. Giles figured it was enough talk for the time. He rode him back to town, a grin working stubbornly across the hard mould of his lips, and it was tough to suppress a rip-roaring explosion of laughter. He had a private talk with the yard boss and then the Kid, and got it fixed finally that the Kid would load up his cattle early and the yard boss would see the car coupled in as number one, and the Kid could hop the train as it pulled out. That would be Chatham's own train, and after Chatham found out, the Kid would have to make the best of things on his own.

The Kid swallowed and looked pretty spooky about how Chatham would take this, but Giles had advanced the shipping costs and the worst Chatham or even Bull could do would be throw the Kid off the train privately. He left the Kid hurtling between uncertainty and excitement, and got back to camp at daylight. The girl was up getting her father's first breakfast, her eyes black with gloom and almost hidden by the puffiness of all night crying. She saw the grin that he could not keep off his lips, and suddenly the darkness left her eyes and they came golden as shafts of brilliant sunlight streaking through heavy snow clouds. She looked hopefully at Giles.

CHAPTER THREE

Bullet Price

AT SUNUP, Bull rode in to report, a vicious satisfaction in the expression of his face. He said, "Boss, the Kid ain't come for his cattle and they've gotten too mixed up for me to cut his herd out now to leave it."

"His own fault!" Chatham snapped. "If he shows up, tell him I'll pay him Ogallala prices and no more! You got the tally on the herd?"

Bull swaggered importantly. "Down to the last one, boss!"

"How do you know there weren't strays last night?" Chatham snapped.

Bull looked hurt. "Boss, you think any critters would get out of this valley without me knowing?"

"All right," Chatham snapped. "Get 'em moving for the loading pens, and keep the boys sober until we get that train rolling!"

Bull wheeled off, his voice smashing out ahead of him. Chatham had the herd checked in his mind. He muttered, "Thirty cattle to the car—well, I guess we can check the number going through the loading chutes just to make sure."

Giles wiped his hand across his mouth and cleared his throat, and winked at the girl across her father's shoulder. She was stopping with an old friend of her mother's nearby for a few days, and then the two women would take the regular train to Chicago and be there when the slow-moving cattle train got in.

Midway of morning the rain stopped, and the day was one of hard, sweating work, but without troubles until the last car was loaded and coupled up. Chatham stood at the chutes staring glacially at Bull. "Yo're thirty-one steers short!" he barked. "By yore own count!"

Bull looked around the empty pens as if maybe the missing doggies would pop

up out of the dust. All day long he had sweated and pushed the outfit so they'd have the six hours between sundown and schedule to enjoy the town, and the boys were in no good humor about his balling up the count. He had to scatter and count every head in every car, and the number came out right—thirty or thirty-one head to a car, the usual number, but the chute check still left a carload to be accounted for.

Chatham's voice was frigid. He told Bull, "Find those steers or their Chicago value comes out of the wage and head pool," and turned toward town, leaving it up to Bull.

Giles grinned inwardly and hummed a pleasant tune at Bull as he followed Chatham, and wasn't surprised when they came back at midnight to find both of Bull's eyes badly swollen and his pride raw and the boys temporarily licked, but gathering a solid force against him. He'd had the number of cattle in each car recounted five times; he had done it twice more himself. He had sent men back to the holding ground and combing every side crease and creek and draw and brush stand within five miles of the trail. He'd turned every cattle pen in town upside down personally to be sure the steers hadn't been rustled right there and hidden undercover, and more than his pride was stinging from a load of scattershot a cranky old woman had put into his hindside for daring to look into her barn.

The yard boss and train master came across the yard and announced they'd have to couple up the caboose, and Chatham said dryly, "All right, then the price comes out of the pay pool!"

The boys' jaws set like the click of so many revolvers, but it was at Bull their animosity was leveled. Something funny had been pulled, and he was the only one in a position to do it, in their opinion; and in their suddenly rebellious temper, they'd have sooner trusted to the devil.

This was a loss of authority and following he couldn't lick with fists and kicks alone, and he was smarting under it when the trainmaster discovered the details of the trouble, and as a last measure, took the car count and checked against the loading sheet. He looked up with the light of his lantern putting its yellow glow across his face and asked with rough humor, "Can't you count, Bull? All yore damned critters are loaded and accounted for!"

Bull stared and his vicious mouth hung open like his jaw was sprung. He hadn't thought to count the number of cars and multiply or add the total because he didn't know that much. All he'd done was count the number in each car, and use the total of the chute check, which, of course, had not included the Kid's separately loaded and coupled car.

"That's these damned fools!" Bull rasped, with a sweeping gesture at the bunch.

"You know what I'd bet?" Giles chuckled at him. "I'd bet the Kid's bunch didn't like yore smell and just ambled off and crawled aboard here all by themselves!"

Bull cursed him and none of the boys had much humor, but it started the rawhiding of the foreman that grew with each bottle after the train rolled out. Bull had bullied this bunch a long time, and like the cattle they herded, they had taken it without expecting anything else from their master, but he had been brutally raw in his cursing that day, and ridicule he laid on as well as fists. Now the whole incident had turned out to be his own thickwitted fault and the rebellion presented a solid front of harsh-humored scorn to make him crawl and writhe and fray his pride with the most biting contempt of all—contempt for stupidity.

To make matters worse, there promised

to be trouble with the cattle right smack off. The whole roadbed from Omaha to Ogallala was still more of a hope than an excuse, and the violent extremes of Nebraska weather had washed and warped and settled the roadbed at every angle possible, wrenching the rails at angles at the joints, and the joints were spread six and eight inches.

These cattle had never been in a barn or felt their hoofs on planks, and they were terrified at the feel of the car floors even before the train pulled out and they felt themselves being carried out on a flood of lurching, banging, rattling, frightening din. The smell of coal smoke was constantly in their nostrils and a ripping, raw crosswind cut through the car slats, and at sunup the train ran into rain again, soaking the straw and turning the footing slippery.

Atop of it, a cattle train was guaranteed no fast haul, nor haul on schedule. It was a kind of a tumbleweed on tracks that stopped on sidings for hours to wait for fast freight and passengers, or, as in the case next morning, rattled right straight through the water stop in order to save a two-day layover while through trains kept their schedules. By sundown, the cattle were beginning to feel their thirst, and the train came out of the storm area into an ocean of unmoving, burned out, stagnant heat such as only the prairie can soak up.

IT WAS after midnight when the train stopped for water, and the half-drunk, bad-tempered, sleepy waddies were sore at the indignity of nursing cattle personally with buckets and performed the task grumblingly and thanklessly and without care. Bull's voice roared over the landscape and his fists and boots, and finally his whip flew. He knocked down a waddy named Quiet Townsend who was thick with drink, and Townsend went after him with a full bucket swinging. A loaded bucket would crush a man's head like an egg, and barely missed Bull's, and his pent-up anger suddenly blew and he was literally crippling Townsend in berserk fury when Chatham ordered the bunch to gang him off.

It was a chance to get in a full good extra wallops and kicks to even scores, and in the end, the boys toted both Townsend and Bull back to the caboose and dumped them down like sacks in their own broken bones and gore. It was something Bull remembered when he came too, and the casualness of his blows and curses went out of him; he turned vengeful, mean and grim. The pack had challenged his authority and he meant to break the whole to submission and make it crawl, but this time he did not have the plains to split them up; they were bunched on the train and in that caboose, and they began to build a solid pulsing hatred of him.

It was a rough beginning and Giles considered that the Kid showed good sense in hiding out forward, although he saw him scampering through the shadows with a bucket at the water stop. The train waited endlessly on the siding in the stagnant heat, which was almost worse than its jolting roll. Then it rattled on through four solid days of that breathless heat, and shuttled and ferried across at Omaha, and the next day they hit a bitterly cold rain again with no letup, and the weakened, wild-eyed cattle began to go down.

Chatham cursed Bull, and Bull cursed the men and ordered them out with goads. Wild with fear and weakness and growing thirst, a down steer was as good as dead from trampling unless goaded up in time. Worse, it would kick down other steers in trying to rise or clear space; and on top of it all, frightened and weak cattle were likely to turn sick with pure fear

when down, and simply die of it all.

Bull drove the unwilling men out on the catwalks in the driving rain, the catwalks being one-foot planks strung alongside the cars, slippery as ice when soaking wet, and protected only by an iron rod strung just above waist height. On these the boys had to pitch and slither to the roll of the train, hanging for dear life with one hand, and trying to goad down cattle up with the other. It was a grueling, nerve-edging, thankless task in a raw rain at night, and half the time they couldn't even make out the downed steers in the smoky pallid lantern light.

The rain held on and the cars got wetter and slipperier, and the call of "Steer down midway forward!" was a raw tempered call that sang back with shorter and shorter spaces between, until the full crew was practically living on the top walking decks or the catwalks, and Bull had turned to a half-mad, driving, savage whipmaster.

That was the state of affairs when the whole train of steers decided to stampede in spite of the fact they could not move more than a few feet. In all other respects, the stampede went on, the cattle white eyed, bawling, humping, kicking, horning; in one car, fifteen steer were down and in another, four were locked with their horns buried in each other.

Bull had brought one dead spent crew back to the caboose, dirty, gaunt and grim, did not even make a pretense of rising when the trainmaster and Chatham and Giles came in. At Ogallala, they would have sneered at a railroader's advice on cattle, but now Chatham looked at the man and asked in a raw voice, "What can you do? I think the herd master's down, but you can't tell, and you can't goad up half a carload of cattle!"

"Why don't you get the Kid tending the front car?" the trainboss asked. "He just goes out and pokes his master up and the others scramble up after him."

Chatham asked weakly, "What Kid?" and then roared, "Lemme see yore train makeup!" and with one glance at the Kid's name and car number, figured roughly what had happened.

Violence washed across Bull's brutal fact, but Chatham turned on him with the grinding power of a glacier and rasped, "Why, you stupid, thick-witted fool! You've been up there fifty times and never saw him! You ain't even seen them steers was acting different, or the herd master wasn't in 'em!"

Bull's flesh tautened against the pounding bulge of veins, and even through his beard and dirt, he looked suddenly pale. His lips twisted and turned wet and then began to work spasmodically. "I'll kill him if it's him!" he rasped. "I'll tear his guts out with my bare hands and throw 'em in the boiler furnace!"

"You'll shut up," Chatham told him dryly, "and let him show you how to pick a master out and get it up, mebbe!"

Bull's eyes sprang with berserk anger and he started to throw his big bulk upward, respect burned out by the humiliation of that dress down from the boss in front of his own boys. Mayhem was in him right at that instant, and Giles stepped quietly out from the wall, and stood between Bull and Chatham.

"Just what was on yore mind, Bull?" Giles asked, his tone velvet soft, but eyes agate hard and deadly.

Bull started to rear; his muscles bunched. Then his gaze fell to the flex of Giles's gun hand. His eyes went on, drawn like a magnet, to the cut-down holster and the inlaid etching of that famous gun handle, and suddenly Giles's merciless scorn and Chatham's contempt struck through him like a freezing mountain wind, and the fight froze in him. He sank back on the bunk, a bully finally facing more ruthless men and sure death, and without the courage to risk a fight

or make a draw for it. Wildly he turned.

GILES'S lips twitched briefly with contempt, and then he asked Chatham, "Shall I go ask the Kid to lend a hand?"

"No, I'll go myself," Chatham grated. "Any son can keep his cattle on their feet in this is someone I want to see!"

He led out and Giles followed, and forgetful of their dead weariness, the boys came trooping after. Drawn hypnotically, afraid to see it and yet unable to resist seeing this, Bull lurched up and followed over the jolting car tops.

The Kid was on his own catwalk when the procession arrived above him; he tensed and gave a sickly grin, but went on goading until he got one certain critter to his feet, and immediately, the other downed steers scrambled up.

Chatham watched with a queer, strained disbelief. He rasped over the banging roar of the train, as if he had to prove the Kid unimportant, "Yore own bunch —you know the master!"

The Kid shrugged and pulled the goad out through the slats. "Same with all of 'em," he muttered.

"Let's see this," Chatham grated, and led the way over the car tops back twenty or so cars, obviously meaning to test the Kid where he wouldn't have the master all singled out.

Bull had come up, but the challenge to him now was not mere physical mastery; it was a challenge of his own superior cattle savvy, and he hollered with a wild notion of belittling the Kid, "Anybody could pick that master!"

He grabbed the Kid's goad and before Chatham could speak was dropping down the ladder onto the catwalk, cursing wildly, and striking in at a down steer. It struggled vainly a few times to clamber up in the slippery wet, then gave up the struggle and no pain would pierce its fear frought numbness. No other steer had moved during this.

Chatham prodded the Kid and he dropped down, searching the car in the circle of smoky lantern light. He gave a grunt and took the goad and prodded a particular steer. The steer snorted and struggled up, and immediately, the others followed to their feet of their own will.

Bull was shaking with anger, black with fury. "What's it prove?" he bellowed. "It was luck; He ain't got the guts for cattle savvy! Didn't he even sneak in like a rat to sneak his bunch out of the herd?"

Chatham called to the Kid, "How'd you manage that so quiet?"

The Kid shot him a hurt, bitter look. "Like I told Giles, I jist picked me the master and led him out."

Bull exploded a great blast of breath. "Led him out!" he bellowed sarcastically. "I'd like to see ya load the herd master out of this mess!"

The Kid looked quiet and thoughtful a moment, then came up the ladder and moved back forward over the top walks. At the second car he dropped midway down the side and studied the mess inside the car. About ten steers were down in the wet—heartless and unmoving in fright. There was a little space around one steer, and he moved on down to the catwalk and tried goading it. The steer struggled, but the straw was bunched and soaked under him, and it failed to catch its footing. Soon it quit responding to the prodding.

Bull let out a howl of derision. The Kid said to Giles, "Hold this," and handed him the lantern, and climbed up the side slats. The one nearest the top left a big space and he went through this, dropping limberly beside the steer he'd picked for leader. He spoke to it, just as he would to a horse, and got hold of its horn and began to pull, at the same time kicking it in the neck.

The steer scrambled wildly and with the Kid pulling it, caught footing and heaved up. The Kid ducked under its horn and stepped onto the next downed steer's back, and as it lurched under it, made a flying dive for the side slats and came out the top as the whole carload scrambled up.

Calls began to break down the train line and then some waddy way back lifted a wild yip, and without an intelligible call, Chatham knew what had happened—in the queer way of these dumb critters, the rest of the herd knew the master was back on its feet, and every steer was struggling up.

All the trouble wasn't over, but there was heart in the tired men. Chatham looked at Bull and asked contemptuously, "You got the guts to drop in and pull a steer out of a snake nest like that?"

Bull wasn't listening. Black burning hatred was filling him and he was muttering thickly, "I'll kill him! I'll rip his guts out with my bare hands! I'll get him!"

The Kid's body was freezing and his face paling. He had good reason to be afraid. He was still sitting on the top slat, but he couldn't get from there to the roof, and hot, berserk animal hate and mayhem was waiting for him below.

Giles reached under his shirt and tossed a piece of dirty bag up to the Kid. He said, "Here's something a certain miss figured you might want, Kid. It started the stampede you got blamed for. One of yore critters was wearing it on his horn!"

The Kid caught it without thinking, staring at it blankly, and then he put two and two together—anyone close and attentive enough at the start of that stampede to have named the Kid's bunch of steer as the trouble would have been close enough to plant that piece of bag on a horn!

And the girl—his girl if he proved up—had sent it along by Giles!

He clawed it in his hand, and grim violence surged up through him in savage waves, and suddenly he let out a wild full-throated train call, and shook the bag toward Bull's face. He didn't know this was just a piece of bag Giles had fixed up in case it came handy, but neither did Bull, and Bull's eyes riveted on the bag, and bulged, and guilt froze the mayhem out of his brute body. His head began to wheel and his gaze swung between the Kid and Chatham and Giles, and then he felt the swelling force of smashing, merciless cruelty in all those men for a man who will risk their necks and livelihoods to frame another man.

He shook his head and began to babble out a denial of something not yet said, and in that instant, the Kid piled on top of him. The catwalk was slick wet and Bull's big body skidded and smashed down upon it hard, and in the same space, the Kid had jerked the torn piece of bag over his head. He couldn't get air and

he sucked choking dust out of the cloth, and grabbed wildly for some kind of handhold.

He forgot to fight and the shift of weight carried him out and over, and smashed him rolling in the cinders. He was scraped raw and knocked windless and he was hurt but he could have caught hold of the last car. But he just sat in the freezing rain, heaving and blubbering, a big bull down with the guts scared out of him.

Nobody spoke for a minute.

The Kid had grabbed the handrail as Bull's slide started to carry him off, and pulled clear; now he stood breathing hard on the catwalk, realizing dimly that the yelling and yipping were for him. Somehow he knew that Giles was grinning, but he didn't quite understand what Chad Chatham was shouting out.

"Unless one of you hombres can show better at climbing in with a boss steer," Chatham was rasping, "I reckon you'll be taking orders from a new pardner in Chatham—"

Hunkered precariously up on the swaying and pitching top walk, Lanky managed to make his drawl clear above the racket. "Pussonally, I ain't going to try and better him! He can work the pants off me, and I aim to be nice and civil about my callouses!"

"What I'm choking on is you ain't going to have those callouses much longer after he takes over," Chatham grunted, with a grin in his harsh voice. "Not after he gets all that easy going, lazy, heavy beef blood-crossed into the old stock, Lanky."

Giles looked at him with a question in his eyes.

Giles asked, "Ain't that going to take a mite of time, boss?"

"Not the way I'm going to hustle him!" Chatham grunted. "I figure he'll take back at least five, six, blooded bulls to the Nueces."

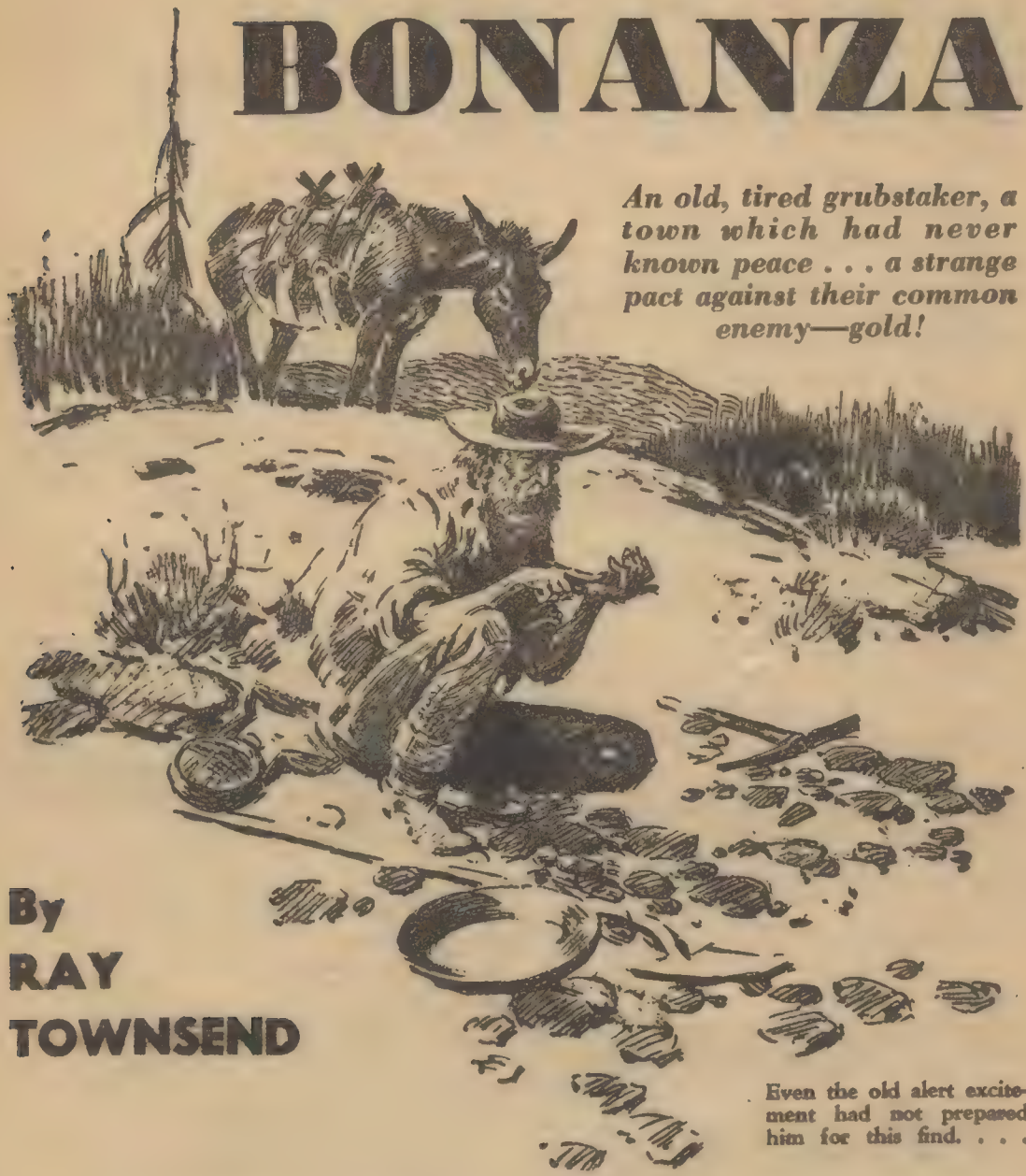
The Kid got the meaning of that in a mixed bewildered fashion and mumbled dazedly, "I ain't going to have enough dollars for any bulls, Mr. Chatham!"

"If you've got just a little sense, you will have!" Chatham chuckled. "You'll have a right handsome bonus as chief steer getter-upper!"

"Or jist a damned bull-whacker?" Giles grinned.

THE LAST BONANZA

An old, tired grubstaker, a town which had never known peace . . . a strange pact against their common enemy—gold!



Even the old alert excitement had not prepared him for this find. . . .

By RAY TOWNSEND

A LOOSE plank spouted dust as the old-timer let his weight onto the raised walk before the Ace High Saloon. His watery blue eyes blinked, and he ran a puzzled hand through dirty iron-grey hair. The false fronted length of deserted street lay mute beneath the man's stare. A single grunt escaped from bearded lips, and a look of final understanding came to his tired eyes.

Hell, it was only another boom town turned ghost. The old-timer sighed as he leaned back against the pillar at the walk's edge. Everything was right now. But for a minute, there— Must be getting old, he mused absently. He'd seen the same thing

happen to other towns many a time. One day the street along the bottom of the gulch was seething with humanity, stores and saloons turning over fortunes in gold every hour. The next day it was deserted, the dusted rays of a setting sun moving without interruption along the store fronts across the street. No, this was no new thing to the old-timer.

Of course, now and then one of these roaring little towns managed to gather enough settle-minded folks to sort of keep things together after the color in the creeks and gulches had faded. But most times the town would just sink back against the gulch walls, passing the years with an easy patience and maybe chuckling to itself at some of the damfool shenanigans that had been the human part of its life.

The old-timer's motions were automatic as he produced tobacco plug and an old worn-bladed knife. Had to cut and roll his chaw finer every year now, it seemed. But he didn't think about it as he leaned back in the heavy silence.

It wasn't so much that the town had turned ghost that bothered him, either. The thing was, really, that he was the last—the only one left. It didn't come out in so many words in his mind now, but it was there just the same.

Why had he stayed?

Hell, he'd been as big a boomer as any, hadn't he? Hit his color out Hangtown way, back in the fifties. Done right smart up on the Frazer, too. Not that he'd hung on to much of it. But then, who had? A strike, then a quick sale. Or maybe, if he was feeling that way, he'd work the claim himself a few months. And then the big town. Seattle. San Francisco. Even lasted long enough to get married that time in 'Frisco, back in fifty-two. *Blue eyes and hair like the finest dust—skin softer than a chamois pouch.* Yes sir, long enough to get married. Not much longer, though.

But good or bad, he'd always been raring to go. Gone, usually, before the muckers had sense enough to realize their pans were working dead gravel. Gone long before the dull, plodding squatters moved in with their slow, killing labor of trying to eke a living from the soil. No sir, that was one type of human he could never understand. Farmers. Bohunks. Ha!

This time, though—well, here he was, the last solitary soul.

RINGER JOE or Ed Benton would have laughed at the figure he made. Pathetic shape of a little old man sitting in front of the corner saloon in a deserted mining town. Oh, he knew, all right! Calamity would have howled in mirth with that coarse, calf-bawling laugh of hers. He could hear them now, laughter time-dimmed, soughing through dusty space inside the lifeless, dilapidated building. He knew, though, it was only an errant breeze, perhaps trifling the spruce boughs out back. He knew he was dreaming.

"Well, reckon if your mind's set on it, they ain't no budging you!"

He'd not missed the reproachfulness of Ed Benton's glance as the man had heaved his bedroll aboard the splayfoot mare. Ed was a good man, and as solid a partner as he'd ever found. But the old-timer had stood on the rise before the cabin, watching man and beast drift down the gulch and out of the dying community. Didn't know what it was, but there just wasn't a hankering, somehow.

The old-timer didn't get back over on the Creek for some time after Ed left. There was a sign up on the Creek. Good sign, no matter what the rest said. But them chickens he'd bought off Joe and Yardley had to be cooped up some way. And then that cow he'd traded old man Curry out of the day he'd left—couldn't leave that critter too long. The old-timer scratched his head, trying to remember what they did about cows back in Missouri.

And seeing it was spring, he kind of thought he'd like to see how corn would do on that flat piece against the rise. And there were seeds, too. Squash, pumpkin—It seemed like there was one damned chore after another somewhere around that cabin on the rise.

But even so, the sign had improved over on the Creek. During the occasional two and three-day stretches when he could get away from the cabin that summer, he'd uncovered the gravelly, overgrown bed of an old tributary. Color was proving up and the old excitement had begun its familiar tingle in the old-timer's blood.

Even the old alert excitement had not prepared him for the richness of his strike, finally. He'd headed up the gully where the old stream bed had doubled back wide, maybe centuries ago. And now, suddenly, the gold was there! Nuggets! Coarse gold! Specimens the size of his thumb! It didn't take the pan to bring out this color!

Maybe the old-timer had been sort of overcome with his sudden fortune. He could see the roulette wheel spinning again in the old Ace High. Iron shod wheels once more plowed deep ruts in the street in the gulch and a man had to watch himself to keep from being run down.

His jackass had wandered away, as usual, but the old-timer hardly noticed. His chamois was brimming! The rich yellow metal sagged in every pocket as he scrambled urgently down into the Creek. Stumbling into the gulch above town, the knowledge of power and wealth was his once more. The town was filled with admiring hundreds. His slightest wish was command to all. His ambling gait quickened as he panted with the secret of his precious bonanza!

Gold!

But the calm serenity of the desolated town was silent reproach as he drew up at the head of the street. Could it be that the town was jealous of its hard-won peacefulness? As though for the first time, he heard the lonely little echoes of his own footsteps sounding amongst the tomblike fronts of the dead town.

Slowly then, the old-timer let his weight onto the raised walk before the Ace High Saloon. A loose plank geysered dust in one fitful spurt, behind.

And now, again, came that long dead laughing that was nothing but the sighing of breeze through sharp-needled bough. It may have been the ridicule of others long gone: ridicule of this little old man for thinking he could buy back the roaring rich excitement of youth with a pocketful of yellow metal. Or it might be—and it was strange, how welcome the thought!—just the whispering prayer of an old town, asking an old man for a final, hard-won rest.

The old-timer snapped shut the worn blade of the knife. As he came to his feet, he ran a purple-veined hand along his jaw, ruefully. The flesh beneath the iron beard was no longer firm. His back ached and his game knee forced him to a limp as he went up the gulch and along the foot of the hill.

Coming out above the town, the old-timer paused. The westering rays of the sun had lifted out of the gulch. Now only the long rise above and the cabin itself stood bright in the sun's yellow radiance. The brilliant green of waving corn and wide spread of squash vine stood bold against the hillslope. In that moment the old-timer's eyes lifted and were filled with the golden beauty of the scene.

Below, a darker shadow of twilight crept through the town. The low sighing of wind that had whispered in the street died out. But on the hill, the old-timer walked upward in golden light, and the riches of his last find were borne home in final, knowing realization; and the metal in his pockets lay heavy and forgotten, needless weight in the peace of his world.

The doctor was on his knees in the wet grass, and Morton's beefy face was as pale as his dirty shirt. . . .

— RED GOLD — RECKONING

"There's gold beyond this shaft, mister — only trouble is, there ain't no road back alive!"

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

GRANGE lay very still, his eyes closed, exerting every effort to relax his numbed body, to hold to steadiness. Keep them guessing—he had to do that. They knew Taber Grange. They were afraid to come too close until they knew whether he was alive or dead. If they couldn't tell for sure, they'd have to go away for a while and wait for light. He was grateful for the murmur of night

wind on the Sierra slopes above him. It added to their uncertainty. They couldn't hear his breathing. They couldn't know. He might be lying waiting for them to come within reach, his big hands ready. They had seen his hands work on tools, on rock. They were afraid of his hands. They couldn't see in the darkness how well their trap had worked, and they were afraid to come to close until they were sure. A man and a woman in the timber a rod away. Murderers for a million dollars.

Wry humor rose in Grange, further taxing his physical control. He had been here too long—three hours—four? Lying on broken rock with one leg caught in a grinding granite trap which had been intended for his whole body. His leg had bled. A good deal, he thought. He could smell the blood, in the fallen mouth of the prospect tunnel. The man and the woman were close and silent, wondering if their work were well enough done and afraid to find out in the darkness. All for a million dollars which didn't yet exist, and now never would.

Interminable silence. Calmness was a desperately struggling something which Grange tried to hold with his clenched hands. He wanted to get out of this rock. He wanted to stand on his feet again. He wanted to face this man and this woman and tell them they had tried to kill him for nothing. He wanted to show them how he had operated from the beginning. The battered private ledger he had kept, with names and odd amounts of money. Investments in the old Susanna shaft, in a promising outcropping on the Stanislaus, in this tunnel here. A list of those who had financed Taber Grange. Dates which spanned nearly five years. Names of a lot of little people who would have their share of his million dollars when he found it. He'd show this man and this woman their names in that ledger. He'd show them they'd tried to cheat a lot of people when they tried to kill him. After that—

There was a sudden sharp grating click of sound. A foot turning on a shard of rock back in the timber. A sibilant oath, without real voice. And footsteps—going down the slope, then fading, finally gone. Grange opened his eyes. He breathed, noisily, because he no longer had to remain silent. A bright, clean star was riding the crown of the ridge. The middle star in the belt of Orion. The calmness for which Grange had been struggling came easily, now. He could make a pattern of thought.

This was Taber Grange, the self-taught engineer. Big Taber Grange, who knew exactly how to make a million dollars, right down to the last decimal point—the patience required, the faith and the labor, the technical dishonesties. He was a mining expert on Mother Lode. A one-hundred-percent sure-thing boy who could prove the 'Forty-niners had scrabbled for froth when the rich cream lay at their feet. A promoter—when he had to be—who could fall on his head and land on his feet. And he had been snagged by a trick older than the church at Columbia or the placer mounds at Moke Hill.

This morning had been like any other Wednesday morning all summer. An early hot sun in a thin blue sky. The big Sierra standing steeply behind the foothills, the summits all granite and perpendicular ice. A few early fisherman belting down the road past camp without a decent trout among them. The bi-weekly power company supply wagon growling up the grade toward the Edison stations above. Young Bill Fallon and Laurie and himself up early because Wednesday was the day Laurie drove down to Sonora to stock groceries and pick up Morton's analysis of the weekly report on their rock. The day played back

slowly, clearly, in Taber Grange's mind.

Bill Fallon frying bacon over the fire, the bright sheen of his wash in the creek on his face and enthusiasm in his eyes. Grange had liked working with young Fallon all summer. He was a big, husky kid from the school at Palo Alto, willing to work hard for scant wages, a summer in the hills, and a little hard-rock experience. A good-looking, good-natured kid who sweat his turns in the tunnel as though he had a stake in it, himself. It should have been a warning, Grange thought now. Nobody sweats for nothing. Not even a good-natured kid.

Bill had turned from the stove, waving a coffee cup like a champagne crystal.

"We been getting better reports the last three weeks, Tay," he had said. "We're sure as hell boring into your lode. I'm buying drinks tonight when Laurie gets back. I'm betting the last sample was at least milling grade ore."

Laurie had been in her tent—a different Laurie than the one who had come angrily up from Bakersfield the day after school was out. Miss Lauriel Shannon, she had been then—Elementary and Secondary Teaching Certificates, Kern County School System. One of the best prospects Taber Grange had ever sold, arriving without notice, hot and dusty from her drive and determined to see what was being done with the three thousand dollars Grange had gotten from her in mid-spring. It had seemed a tough break—an investor in a digging camp was not Grange's idea of a holiday. Not a low-heeled, tweed-and-glasses schoolteacher investor.. Not when the rock really didn't look too good and he was about ready to put the bite on her again.

But Laurie had changed. The air, maybe. Her distrust evaporated. She saw in a couple of weeks that Grange was broke and she turned up eighteen hundred dollars from heaven knew where. She learned to let her hair hang loose in the sun and to worm into a pair of denims and even mockingly, delightedly to relish the one thing Grange had in common with young Fallon—an occasional hunger for a woman with red hair.

LAURIE had come out of her tent, laughing, with the sun in her eyes. She had taken the coffee mug from Bill Fallon's hand. They'd breakfasted together, their humor bright as the sun, and Grange had felt a little guilty about cheating Laurie. His usual argument to himself that it really wasn't cheating, but a little deception to sustain hope and enthusiasm until they actually did reach mill grade-rock, had seemed empty this morning. They'd breakfasted, and Laurie had gone to the buckboard and blown them each a kiss before she splashed into the ford. One to young Fallon, one to Grange, and his death had already been planned.

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Bill Fallon had come up from the tool shed and headed for the tunnel, when Laurie was gone. Grange had stopped him.

"We both need a day in the sun, Bill. Drill steel's all dull. Thought I'd fire the forge and sharpen a few lengths. Why don't you try fishing?"

Fallon had showed the tools he carried. A saw, a single-jack, a hatchet, a bag of spikes and a coil of splicing wire.

"I'm no fisherman," he had said. "I can't sit still, waiting for Laurie to get back, and I don't want to crank the blower on the forge for you. Shoring in the tunnel is sloppy in a couple places. It could do with a few cripples. Thought I'd cut them in."

It had seemed reasonable. Thoughtful initiative on the kid's part. The tunnel shoring was sound enough for a prospect hole, but if The Lode showed up extra cripples would be something to think about. So Grange had nodded and Fallon had gone on up the slope, his hands full of tools.

Labor in a tunnel was monotonous. The sun had felt good on Grange's back; the acrid forge smoke had tasted good. The blower had turned easily, the swages had been sharp, the hammer light. Every piece of drill steel in camp had a fresh, tempered, four-pointed cutting star on the working end when Laurie splashed back through the ford and jumped from the buckboard, running across meadow grass as though she were only ten years old.

Her lips had been parted, her hair a rich flying red halo. She had suddenly been beautiful. A flaming half-angel who looked as though she had never heard of teachers' tenure and didn't give a damn about it.

"Tay—it's all right, now! A hundred dollars to the ton—really! I wrote it down so I'd believe it when I got back here. We've struck real mill-grade ore!"

Her words had run out against Grange's chest. There hadn't been many more of them, anyway. Just incredulous eyes in an upturned face. Grange had struggled again with a sense of guilt. Morton had overdone it. He didn't need this much enthusiasm. A ten-dollar report would have been enough, not a hundred. Morton was trying too hard to earn his fifty dollars in side money. He had kicked this report for Laurie too high. He would have to be toned down.

Incredulous eyes in Laurie's upturned face and soft, uncertain lips. Grange had wrapped her in his arms, knowing she wanted this, and knowing his own desire. A short, quick kiss, and then a long one in the low afternoon sun. The taste of salt on his lips and then no taste. Fuel for hunger. A roaring in the mountains. Deception and a million dollars had seemed equally unimportant. Laurie laughing unsteadily after a little, and sitting down at the camp table.

"You understand, Tay? It's real! No more just guessing. No more not being sure—of anything. It's your lode. The one you said you'd find one day. We've got to tell Bill—"

"He's up at the tunnel," Grange had told her. She had laughed shakily once more.

"I couldn't walk that far, honest! Not now. But Tay—hurry back!"

That was the way it had been. Grange silently cursing Morton for padding Laurie's report too much. Laurie with excitement an explosion in her eyes. And behind it, where a man with a gift at deception himself couldn't see it, the knowledge that the partnership papers they had drawn weeks before gave sole title to this claim to the survivor in case of the death of either of them.

Grange had hurried up the slope with the warmth of Laurie's mouth on his lips.

Bill Fallon had not answered his hail from the mouth of the tunnel. For good reason. Fallon wasn't on the claim. His work was done. A length of wire, a foot above the tunnel floor just within the gloom of the interior, stretched carefully between weakened pillars. Grange had caught his toe, stumbled, and leaped reflexively backward. The rubble above the tunnel mouth, deprived of support, had come down—tons of it. Grange had been quick on his feet, and lucky—he wasn't dead.

That was the way it had been. Grange lay motionless, looking up at the fresh, scarred slide above the tunnel, until the middle star in the belt of Orion vanished behind a jackpine tuft. He moved then. He had let enough time elapse. A length of sapling was within reach. It had to go at a certain angle and across a certain fulcrum. It was heavier than he had anticipated, and its rounded end refused to catch. A sudden sweat drenched him; then, exhausting perversity, the pole slid exactly as he wanted it into a crevice under the rock pinning his lower leg.

He brought his weight to bear, carefully. The only give was the spring of the sapling. The rock didn't move. His torso ridged with bunched muscle; his body lifted clear of the ground. The sapling sprung provocatively, straightened a little, and stone grated. Torso dragging hips, and hips dragging thighs, Grange inched his body clear. There was no feeling in the injured leg, but it was free. He released the sapling. The rock he had raised was wedged again. It didn't settle.

Grange wanted more light. The leg of his pants was stiff with blood, and he couldn't pull it up. He explored through its caked stiffness. There was a spongy area on both sides of the shin bone, midway between knee and ankle, but the bone seemed sound. Thrusting with the sapling, Grange climbed to his good foot and put weight onto the injured leg. It hinged loosely—dead, asleep—as though it had been crossed too long. But it supported him, and he staggered forward. Feeling would return, when stimulated circulation absorbed the anesthesia of shock. It would be painful, but he didn't have far to go. Only back to camp—back to Bill Fallon and Laurie.

THERE were coals in the camp fireplace, and wood was beside the stonework. Grange piled on sticks until a big blaze threw an approximation of his shadow on toward the creek. Laurie and young Fallon were gone, but they'd have to come back to their million dollars. And he'd be waiting. Grange sank onto Laurie's canvas chair and put his leg up on a bench at the table. His pants leg was smeared with dirt. Dirt was in his hair and his pockets, on his face and his shirt, under his nails. And his leg was hurting. It was hurting like hell. He was sitting in Laurie's chair with his lips pressed tight and a bottle of whiskey in his lap and his eyes on the road when the buckboard slashed around the bend below, dipped into the ford, and bounced out onto the meadow grass with water running from it.

Laurie climbed down, and young Bill Fallon, and the little doctor whose office was next to a filling station in Sonora. Grange drank as much whiskey as he could between breaths. Another buckboard cut through roadside timber, and a lot of men piled out of it. One was John Morton, who gave the others orders. They hurried off through the trees up the slope. If they were looking for him, Grange thought, they were going the wrong way.

Bill Fallon had a big bandage on his head. He stumbled a little, coming across the grass with Laurie and the doctor and Morton. It was very neat, very convinc-

ing. Fallon was a smart kid, Laurie was a smart girl—they were doing it right. Grange's lips parted in something too nasty for a grin. He tried the whiskey again, but it wouldn't go down.

Laurie saw him first. Morton turned kind of green. The little doctor started swearing, and Bill Fallon stumbled again. But Laurie ran toward Grange.

"Tay! Oh, Tay—!" She was beside him. She was without her coat, and her arms were cold as she put them tight around him. The whiskey bottle rolled from his lap and lay on its side on the ground, gurgling softly. Laurie was laughing and sobbing. "Tay, are you all right?"

"Fine," Grange said. "Fine."

The doctor was on his knees in the wet grass, still swearing. He ran a pair of scissors up Grange's caked pants-leg. There were starbursts, skyrockets, Roman candles. Surgically fused pyrotechnics, erupting from mangled flesh. Grange tried to swing on the doctor, but Laurie was holding him and he was too far away, anyhow. There was the smell of arnica. He pushed Laurie back. Morton's beefy face was as pale as the white background of his dirty striped shirt. He was scared by all this, and it showed.

"I sent my boys to your tunnel to see what they could find," he told Grange. He licked his lips and nodded uneasily toward young Fallon. "The same ones jump you that got the boy?"

Fallon was close. Grange could see him plainly. He had been beaten, severely. A good job—good enough to look right. Bill was hurt, and it was funny. Grange wondered if Laurie had done it. The kid had let someone beat his head half off—for half a million dollars, he thought. But really for nothing. Grange wanted to laugh.

"No," he said to Morton.

"A fall, then?" Morton hazarded unwillingly. "Has your tunnel collapsed?"

Tunnels didn't come down often, not Grange tunnels. Morton knew that; everybody from Sonora to Grass Valley knew it. Why this guess, then? Had Laurie gotten excited and talked too much? Had she banged Fallon's head too hard, so he'd gotten off his trolley and spilled something? The doc was still fussing with his leg. Grange looked for Laurie and found her still practically in his lap. He tried to push her away again.

"Go away, Laurie," he said. "Who's got a drink?" But Laurie wouldn't move away.

"Tay, I didn't know what to do—" They were sobs, all right. Good, let-down ones. "Bill was hurt. He came staggering across the creek, all blood. He couldn't talk, couldn't tell me what had happened. He just stood there, weaving back and forth. I was scared, Tay, scared to death. I didn't know where you were, and Bill's head—!" Laurie shivered as though the way she claimed Fallon's head had looked still made her sick. She had really sold herself. "I had to have help. My note—Tay, you did find my note?"

Grange had seen a piece of paper on the camp table, weighted with a little rock. He had ignored it. He grinned unpleasantly at Laurie.

There was a sudden new flick of pain in his leg. The doc straightened, looking very satisfied. He held an empty hypo needle. Grange hadn't thought of this. He should have known Laurie wouldn't take chances. She'd brought the doc out on a double play. He could examine a man and say he was dead, or he could punch a needle into one that wasn't dead and make sure he died. It was very easy.

"Shock," the doc said to Laurie. "Psychological and pathological, both. Get him to bed. Rest will do the trick, now."

Grange swore at the doc. A fine, heart-

felt exhibition of tongue work. He didn't let up till he had the rough edges worn off.

"What big ears you've got, Doc!" he wound up. "Heard about a million dollars in rock, too, eh? Left your ethics framed on your wall and piled out here with a hypo needle in your hand and gold stars in your eyes. Did Laurie have a hard time selling you or did Bill do the job while you were winding that gauze turban around his head?"

It was like talking to somebody who wasn't there. The doc asked for a blanket and went with Laurie into her tent to get one. Bill Fallon sat across the table with his bandaged head down on his arms. Only Morton looked at Grange, and he was still scared—maybe by the same thought which whirred in Grange's head:

We, the Jury, find death to have been induced by injury and exposure sustained in a mine accident as hereinbefore set forth.

LAURIE would have trouble with Morton. There was yellow in him. She couldn't buy Morton because he knew there wasn't anything to buy him with. There wasn't any hundred dollars to the ton. The best Morton's private reports to Grange had showed was traces—maybe thirty, thirty-five cents—a long way from mill-grade in hardrock operations. Morton had overdone his instructions to keep Laurie interested in Grange's tunnel and now he was looking at murder which was done because of it.

Grange slid his bandaged leg to the ground. He didn't know how fast the stuff in the doc's needle would work, how much time he had for his laugh. Faces came in at him, restraining hands. He shook them off, grinning at Morton.

"Tell 'em, John," he ordered. "Tell the poor fools. Tell Laurie—"

Morton's mouth opened but nothing came out, as though he didn't want to talk, or didn't have his mind made up, or was looking for an out. Grange didn't understand; Morton was clear—he could laugh, too. But he didn't, and Laurie swung to face the lab man. A tired, tear-stained, white-faced Laurie, looking very small, but wound up for the last act. Grange doubted she could top her performance so far, but he wanted to hear her try.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Morton!" she cried. "I understood you months ago, a cheap, lying crook! I was a long time seeing that Taber Grange was different from you. That he is a wonderful kind of a fool who believes in himself and the Sierra so much he'd cheat for a chance to keep on digging—a chance to make everybody who had helped him rich. I know about

"Your men, from the stage, by the creek—there in the brush. . . ."

the reports he fixed with you—a trace, at first—then a month ago three dollars—today thirty dollars to the ton—"

Grange was stunned. Laurie was a schoolteacher; schoolteachers didn't understand things like this; they didn't guess. It didn't make sense. Neither did Laurie's fierceness and the way John Morton was almost cringing.

"Since you first tried to buy my half of the claim I've been taking samples over to Jackson, too," Laurie went on recklessly. "I've been getting the true reports, the ones you've been holding out on Tay and me, both—"

Morton hunched a little, like a dog with a bite out of somebody's hide in mind. Laurie's voice went on.

"Today's report was a hundred dollars to the ton, Mr. Morton—not thirty! And I got a glimpse of the men who beat Bill. I've seen them in your office. So you thought I'd sell if Bill was hurt and Tay was gone. Your men from the stage, by the creek when I forded it, then in the brush up by the tunnel after the slide—afraid to go near Tay for fear he might still be alive and waiting for them. So I went for help. I couldn't tell about Tay, but Bill was bleeding and I had to have help—"

It made sense enough, now. Taber Grange put both feet on the ground. He walked on his hurt leg as though it was solid timber. He brushed the protesting doc out of his way. He caught John Morton as the man pivoted away from the group. He caught John Morton in his hands and held him as he had tried to hold onto his calmness, up under the rock at the tunnel. Morton cried out, struggling. Grange let his fingers tighten until Morton subsided.

Lights came up, at the ford and in the meadow—lights revealing men who had been waiting in the darkness. Flashes winked as they ran toward the fire.

One said he wanted Morton. Taber Grange opened his hands. Morton dropped from them. Officers carried him away. More officers came down the slope.

"These three were at the tunnel, Captain," one of them said. "Caught 'em pulling some wire from some timbers in the slide. Mr. Grange was lucky—"

Lucky wasn't the word Grange had been calling himself, but maybe that was right. Still, not as lucky as young Fallon. Bill was grinning. His head was hurting badly and it showed, but he was grinning. He had been hurt and Laurie had taken him to town. Tay Grange was maybe dead, but she had taken Bill to town. It was all right with Grange. Laurie was crying. He touched her shoulder.

"Bill will be all right," he said.

Laurie wheeled and threw herself against Grange's chest, nearly knocking him down. His chest, not young Fallon's. She pressed close, like she'd been there since sundown, when she'd told him about the hundred-dollar assay. Bill Fallon kept on grinning as though he hadn't lost anything. Grinning and waving another bottle of whiskey across the table.

"On me, like I promised, Tay," he said. "Already got a hell of a head, so I'm in the mood. And you ought to be. Looks like we better pour double jiggers and break the glasses!"

Fallon's grin was admiring, unresentful, knowing. Grange grinned back.

"Go away, boy," he said. "I'm busy."

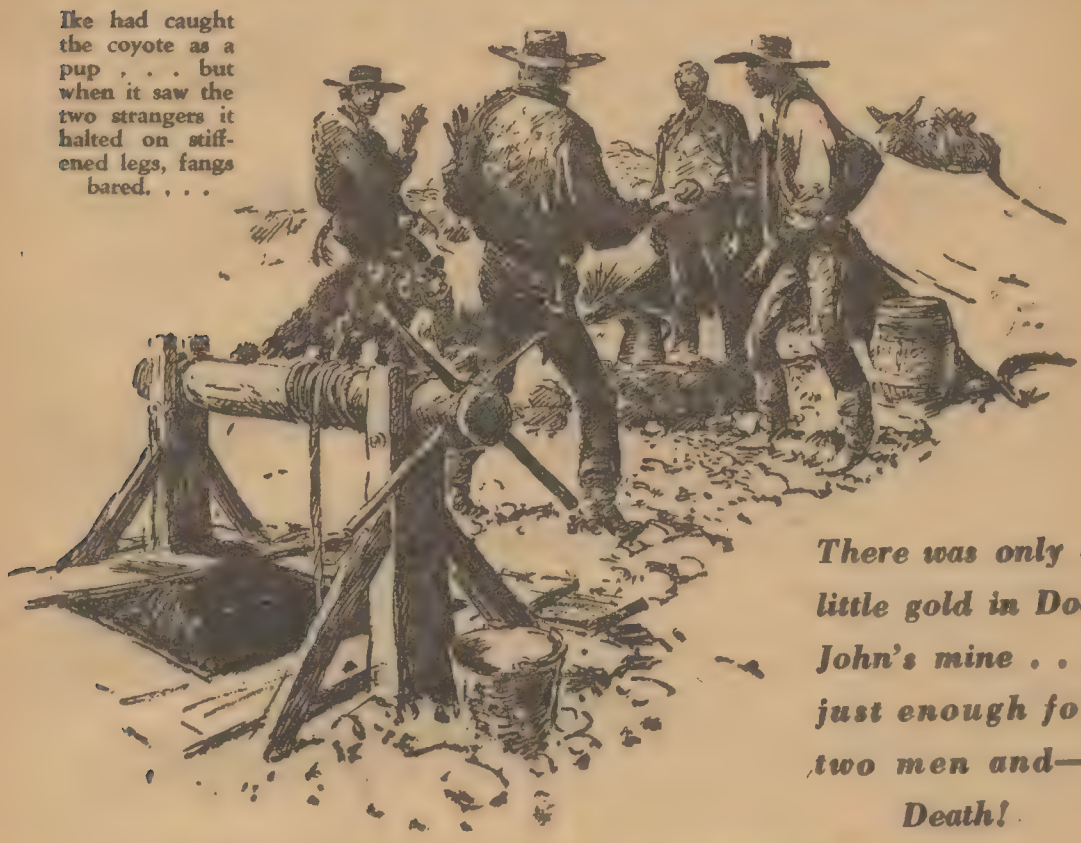
He put his hands in Laurie's hair. It was red gold in the firelight. A million dollars worth. He pulled on Laurie's hair, tipping her head back, and he kissed her while the little doc from Sonora kept shaking his head. He kissed her.

"Got to have a name for the claim, now," he murmured.

"Big T," Laurie said.

"Uh-uh," Grange said into her ear. *"Redhead."* And he kissed her again.

DEATH STAKES —THIS CLAIM—



Ike had caught the coyote as a pup . . . but when it saw the two strangers it halted on stiffened legs, fangs bared. . . .

There was only a little gold in Doc John's mine . . . just enough for two men and— Death!

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

THEY came with the return of Ike Tyree, those two gun-hung riders. They rode with the late sun slanting full against their faces, two travel-stained men who studied the camp and its surroundings with quick, restless eyes. They circled the rock-rubble at the mouth of the mine shaft, reined in near the dead ashes of the open-air fireplace, and looked down at the man resting in the thin shade of the tarpaulin. The tall one leaned on his saddle horn and smiled.

"You'll be Doc McFee, I reckon? Howdy."

Dr. John McFee said, "Yes," and made a vague motion with one thin hand. "Light down and rest, gentlemen."

McFee got slowly to his feet, like a man who had driven himself too hard and too long, and had nothing left in him. He was medium tall, delicately boned, and for all the burning heat of the desert sun there was no color in his face. The skin was drawn so thinly across the frontal bones of his face that it had an almost waxy transparency, and there was not enough blood to take blue from his lips.

Leather creaked as the man in the saddle shifted his weight. "You look kind of peaked, Doc."

"I'm not well," said McFee. He resented the intrusion of the two strangers, and the cool speculative way they watched him stirred a vague feeling of alarm in him. But he refused to let his resentment show. He was a small, precise man who remembered the lost glory of Macon and Savannah before the war, when a host was governed by the very strictest rules of hospitality.

"Light down and rest yourselves, gentlemen." He made no excuses for his meager camp. "We'll have coffee presently, if you like."

He excused himself, and turned away from the two strangers. He stepped out from under the tarpaulin, and felt the impact of the sun. But that was only a surface heat that did nothing for the chill that was inside him. He shivered slightly.

Ike Tyree came around the rubble pile at his stolid pace, leading the pack mule. The half-breed was a huge man, with loose meaty lips and small murky eyes that reflected only shallowly the dim workings of his mind. He halted the mule, lifted his big head, his mouth stretched in a slow smile of childish pleasure.

"You're two days late, Ike," John McFee said softly.

The half-breed sensed McFee's dissatisfaction, and his smile faded with uncertainty. Then he looked at the two strangers, and he grinned again.

"Ike's friends," he said. "They good to Ike. Ike bring them here so they be good to Doctor John, too."

McFee's frown was a brief shadowy thing. "Ike, I told you—" But he halted that. The strangers were here, and McFee's innate sense of decorum sealed off his displeasure. By every sign of the profession he recognized them for what they were, gunmen and killers, but as long as they remained in his camp he would show them hospitality. Just as he had fed and brought wine to General Sherman's officers that black day in Georgia ten years ago, knowing all the while that by nightfall flames would blacken and eat through the white columns and high gables of his plantation home.

"They good friends to Ike," the half-breed said again. He pointed with a huge calloused hand. "Him Charley Shade. Him Tate Grinow."

"Greenough," the short man said.

McFee acknowledged them with his nod. "A pleasure, gentlemen."

"Sure," Tate Greenough murmured, and there was something malicious in the amusement squeezing through his cold gray eyes.

The half-breed turned and began unpacking the mule in his slow unthinking way. McFee thought, *They followed Ike here because of the mine.* There was reason for alarm in that, but it touched him only shallowly, a thin worn man who enjoyed the meager pleasures of his existence without any interest or fear for the uncertainty of the next day.

He watched Charley Shade tramp through the rocks, and peer into the black depths of the mine shaft. *He's wondering how much gold there is down there.* But McFee's immediate interest was in the fire he was building under the smoke-scarred coffee pot. The gold he and Ike Tyree took out of that hole in the earth meant but little to him; he measured its value in the pleasures it would buy: a cup of good coffee at breakfast, the pipe of tobacco he allowed himself at the end of each day, the relief he found in the medicine he needed.

CHARLEY SHADE came back and squatted near the fire, a tall lank man with a thin smile that never softened the cold speculative glint in his eyes.

"I envy a man who hits it rich, McFee. Looks like you made a big strike here."

Wind shifted and fanned smoke into McFee's face, and a spasm of coughing shook his thin frame. "We found only a small pocket. Just enough to pay for the barest necessities."

"Sure," Charley Shade grinned. "Sure."

McFee straightened and brushed the dust from his knees. He watched the half-breed pull off the heavy pack and spank the mule out of camp to forage for itself. Then Ike was lumbering toward the arroyo where he kept the coyote penned, his heavy face bright with childish anticipation.

McFee said, "You shouldn't have bought the whiskey for him, gentlemen."

Squatting on his heels under the tarpaulin, Tate Greenough grinned. "It was just a little law we broke, McFee. An Injun has a taste for good whiskey the same as a white man. Anyhow the big fellow is half white."

McFee pressed down the resentment that rose through him. He said, "I'd rather you hadn't. Ike has the mind of a five-year-old. Whiskey could make him mean, and he might have hurt someone. He has no idea how strong he is."

"We kept a close eye on him all the time," Greenough drawled. "We never let him out of our sight."

Ike had caught the coyote as a pup, and now at full growth it tolerated McFee and acknowledge only the half-breed. It was a gaunt, rangy animal, more wild than tame, straining out of the arroyo at the end of the rawhide leash Ike Tyree gripped. It saw the two strangers and halted on stiffened legs, hackles raised and fangs bared. The half-breed strode on, dragging the animal with him. Tate Greenough shoved to his feet, and backed away warily.

"Get that thing out of here, Tyree."

The half-breed halted, grinning in his thick foolish way. "You afraid, no?"

"I don't like coyotes, yes!" Greenough snapped. "Take him back where you got him."

Charley Shade dropped his hand to his gun, and took a long stride to one side. McFee stood motionless near the open fireplace, hearing the sharp lash of Greenough's voice.

"Tell him to drag that coyote away from here, McFee. I'll kill it if he don't!"

McFee said, "You'd better do as he says, Ike. Put Rojo back in the pen."

But that was futile, and McFee knew it. He watched the half-breed's smile cloud, and understood the dim workings of the man's mind. Ike had caught the coyote as a new-born whelp, raising the animal as a child would any other pet. And in the shadowy recesses of the half-breed's mind was a sense of pride and unthinking stubbornness.

McFee said quickly, "Let him have his way, gentlemen. He considers you his friends, and he only wants to show you his pet. Just humor him a little—"

"To hell with that!" Charley Shade bit out. "You don't know how it is with Greenough, McFee. He was all shot up once and holed up back in the hills. A pair of coyotes found him, and he never forgot what happened one night. You never knew coyotes would attack a man if he's half dead and they're hungry enough, but Greenough's left foot—tell your Injun to do like Tate says, McFee."

But there was no time for McFee to do anything, even if there had been anything he could do. Memory of an old terror whipped loose in Tate Greenough, and unreasoning rage darkened his hard face. He grabbed up a rock and took a long jumping stride toward the half-breed.

"You damn Injun, I told you to take that thing out of here."

The half-breed had no intention of doing what he did. He saw the rock in Greenough's hand, he saw the man's flare

of temper, and big as he was he had a child's quick sense of fright. He jerked up his hand to protect himself from the rock he thought was coming, and the rawhide leash slipped from his grip. The coyote bounded to one side, with its fangs bared, snarling. Tate Greenough clawed out his gun, and killed the animal.

John McFee saw all this in a kaleidoscopic blur of unreality. He saw shock rivet every muscle in the half-breed's huge frame. Ike bent over the coyote's dead body, making hurt, broken sounds in the depths of his throat. He touched the blood unbelievingly, and looked numbly at the red smear on his fingers. He turned his dull wet eyes toward Greenough.

"Rojo—he dead!" he said slowly, as though struggling in his dim way to find an understanding of what had happened. "Rojo was Ike's friend. You hurt Rojo, and now he dead."

He pushed slowly to his feet, a giant of a man with untested power in his body, and no brain to govern it.

"You hurt Ike's friend. Now Ike will hurt you."

He started forward in his heavy, shuffling strides.

Tate Greenough swung his gun savagely. "Stay back, you damn fool."

McFee spoke desperately. "Ike! Don't do it, Ike!" But he couldn't make the half-breed hear him.

"You killed Ike's friend dead. Now Ike will kill you dead."

Greenough's gun jumped, and the bullet smashed high in the half-breed's chest. But it didn't halt him. The shock of the bullet ruffled his face with a foolish expression of agony, but it didn't stop him. He lumbered on, a witless bull of a man, his huge frame jerking as the bullets slammed into him.

Greenough yelled wildly, "Stop him, Charley! My God—kill him!"

But Charley Shade's eyes watched only the thin, aging man under the tarpaulin.

McFee saw it all, and he could do nothing about it. He didn't try to. He saw the bullets slam into Ike's huge body, and he saw the killer wheel and try to run—but there was no time for that. Ike's big hands reached out and jerked Greenough around.

"Now Ike will kill you."

The half-breed tripped, and both men went down. Greenough screamed, and through that terror-ridden lash of sound came the muffled roar of a shot. The half-breed rolled over, and pushed heavily to his feet. He looked with dully agony toward McFee, his loose mouth working for words.

"Ike hurt, Doctor John."

He turned stolidly and bent his head toward Greenough's lax body. His big body folded slowly, and he didn't move after he struck the ground.

McFee turned to find Charley Shade watching him with dry amusement.

"That leaves only you and me, Doc. And after you're gone that leaves only me—and your gold mine."

STANDING at the mouth of the mine shaft, John McFee looked toward the crimson backwash where the sun had died fifteen minutes ago. Out there was the yellowing haze of dusk, the lingering heat, the raw bones of mesas thrusting up against ragged outline of distant mountains. He was a thin, bloodless man who was a decade or more older than his years, with sick skin and blue-tinged lips, and the futile memory of better days haunting his eyes. He spoke softly, out of that lost memory.

"A few years ago I was quite wealthy, Mr. Shade. I was a doctor, in Savannah, and I had an excellent practise. I was doing my bit for the South, even though the Army couldn't use me."

"I was with John Brown," Charley

Shade said laconically, "for a while."

"I'm happy to know that," McFee said softly. And then he said, "One day Sherman's troops reached my country. They were like locusts, destroying everything they touched. But that was war, I suppose. Most of them were gentlemen, only doing what they had to do. I lost everything I owned that day. My fields and my home were torched, my horses were slaughtered—"

Charley Shade said with cold impatience, "You're wasting my time, McFee. I want to see that gold."

McFee nodded slowly. "Yes—I suppose you do. I only wanted you to know that I no longer have a home or family. I came out here to forget, and to find a little peace. There is but little gold in my mine. I'm not a well man, and I'm not afraid of—of what you plan to do to me. I tell you that as a sort of warning."

Shade's smile was brittle, malevolent. "Your warning," he said coldly, "is the least of my worries. Take me down to that vein, McFee."

"Yes," McFee said. "I believe it will be best if I do."

He stepped onto the platform hanging in the mine shaft, and the gunman took his position beside him, watchful and wary.

"This is a poor man's mine." McFee said. "We have to use rope and pulleys to lower ourselves to the bottom."

He gripped the rope, and began playing it out. The day's last light dropped away from them, became a gray rectangle diminishing overhead. There was an earthy coldness inside the shaft, and McFee shivered. He played out the rope steadily, his breathing turning heavy from the strain.

Halfway down the shaft, he said, "My left arm seems to be going dead, Mr. Shade. Would you mind letting us the rest of the way down?"

They sank deeper into the shaft, through the dead chill and silence, through darkness that squeezed its black hands around the yellow glow of the lantern.

Four feet from the bottom, the platform suddenly plunged downward, unchecked, and struck hard on the rocks below. The flame in the lantern guttered and dropped out, and there was a loose coiling movement of falling rope around the two men. Charley Shade cursed with panicked harshness.

"That rope—it broke loose up there, McFee!"

"I rather suspected it would."

Sitting there where he had fallen, McFee could hear the man kicking around in the blackness. A match scratched, flamed brightly, and settled into a steady glow, and against that light McFee saw the terror riding the gunman's eyes.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Shade." he said with whispery gentleness. "You must make yourself accept what really is very simple. The rope was badly worn near the upper end, and it broke. Of course it will be impossible to climb out now."

He looked at the man's drawn gun, at the panic and hatred and lust to kill in the man's staring eyes. McFee smiled.

"My heart," he said. But he knew the killer would have to know more to fully understand. And he wanted out of all the bitterness in him for the man to know everything.

"My left arm and leg went dead halfway down the shaft," he said quietly. "It was caused by my heart beginning to fail, of course. So shooting me won't really help you at all, Mr. Shade. Not even threatening to shoot me now. It's quite funny this way, isn't it, sir?"

"Damn it, you fool! What's funny about it?"

"The thing I'm wondering about," McFee said gently. "I've been wondering, Mr. Shade, which of us will die first."

TALES of the

by LEE

CLAY ALLISON
(THE CORPSE-MAKER)

CLAY ALLISON LEARNED KILLING AS A SOLDIER IN THE CIVIL WAR. MUSTERED OUT AT 15, HE RETURNED TO HIS NATIVE TENNESSEE, SHOT A YANKEE-SYMPATHIZING NEIGHBOR FOR BREAKING HIS MOTHER'S PET PITCHER, AND DEPARTED HURRIEDLY FOR THE WEST.

A DEAD SHOT AND FAST ON THE DRAW, HE EARNED THE TITLE OF "CORPSE-MAKER" IN HIS LETHAL WANDERINGS. BUT WHERE THE LONG-HAIRED PROFESSIONAL GUN-FIGHTERS WERE COLD-EYED UNIMAGINATIVE KILLERS, ALLISON HAD A FLAIR FOR THE UNUSUAL.

AFTER AN ARGUMENT WITH A FELLOW COWHAND IN TEXAS, PISTOLS SEEMED INDICATED. CLAY, HOWEVER, PROPOSED THEY DIG AN 8-FOOT GRAVE AND FIGHT IT OUT THEREIN WITH BOWIE KNIVES. CLAY EMERGED, CUT BUT CONSCIOUS.

HARDY

IN NEW MEXICO, WITH A SHOTGUN, HE BLASTED A STOVEPIPE HAT -- WHICH ANNOYED HIM -- FROM THE HEAD OF A DOCTOR, THEN BOUGHT THE TREMBLING MEDICO MORE APPROPRIATE 10-GALLON HEADGEAR.

"OLD" WEST

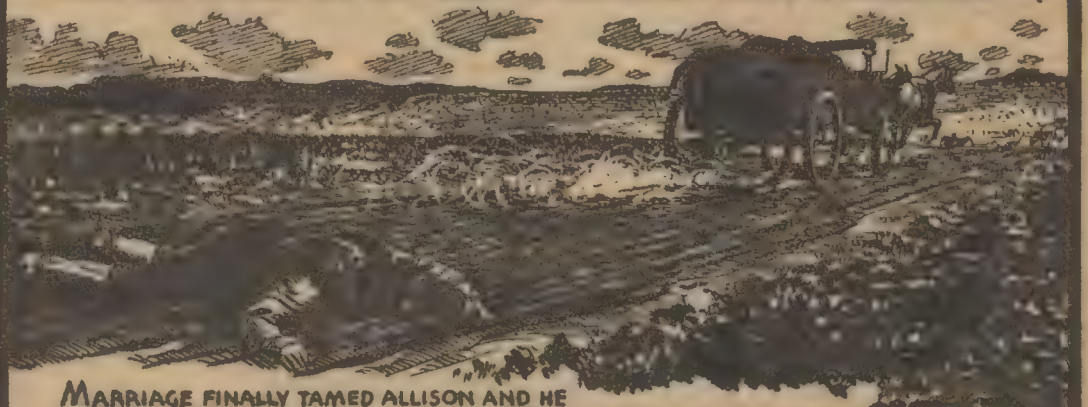
AN ALTERCATION OVER A HORSE RACE LED CLAY TO USE HIS FISTS ON ONE BILL CHUNK, A 14-NOTCH KILLER. CLAY AGREED TO PISTOLS BUT STIPULATED THE FIGHT BE ON HORSEBACK AND AFTER DINNER. DURING THE MEAL CHUNK SUDDENLY WENT FOR HIS GUN. CLAY BEAT HIM TO THE DRAW.

HE LIKED TO DANCE, PREFERABLY NUDE EXCEPT FOR GUN BELT AND SIX-SHOOTERS, AND KILLED A COLORADO SHERIFF WHO BACKED HIS OBJECTIONS TO THAT FORM OF AMUSEMENT BY DRAWING DOWN ON HIM WITH A SHOTGUN.

ONCE HE WAS ENCOURAGING SOME COWBOYS TO DANCE FOR HIS ENTERTAINMENT BY WELL-PLACED SHOTS BETWEEN THEIR TWINKLING TOES WHEN HE FELT THE NUDGE OF A PISTOL IN HIS BACK. DROPPING HIS OWN WEAPONS, HE TURNED TO FIND A SCRAWNY 14-YEAR-OLD GLARING UP AT HIM ALONG THE BARREL.

"ALL RIGHT," THE KID QUAVERED, "YOU LIKE DANCING SO MUCH, NOW YOU DANCE!" CLAY DANCED UNTIL HIS TONGUE HUNG OUT.

THEY SAY THAT WHEN A LAS VEGAS DENTIST EXTRACTED THE WRONG TOOTH CLAY FLOORED HIM AND PULLED 5 OF THE DENTIST'S MOLARS IN RETALIATION.



MARRIAGE FINALLY TAMED ALLISON AND HE SETTLED DOWN ON A RANCH. HE WAS DRIVING TO TOWN ONE DAY WHEN HIS FOOT SLIPPED AND HE FELL TO HIS DEATH UNDER THE WHEELS OF HIS OWN WAGON.

RIDE THE RED ROUNDUP

By PAUL CLANE

He clawed back his slicker to get at his gun, and as if it were a signal five guns flamed in the night. . . .

"I got one final message for you, rustler—if I see you on my land . . . one of us is gonna die!"

THUMBS hooked over his gunbelt, Larry Parker went hunting for Hart Lake. The town of Hodgeman had four saloons and it was in the fourth and biggest that he found his man.

Larry stood just inside the batwing

doors, his eyes adjusting to the dusky coolness inside the Montana Saloon. His expressive, long-jawed face was blank, masking the anger deep inside him. He saw Lake at the bar, buying for four range bums. Slowly Larry drew in his breath. Straightening his long, lank body he moved forward.

"Lake," he said softly. Hart Lake turned, a glass of whiskey in his hand. He was a flashy dresser who wore California pants over his thick, short legs, and a silk shirt across his broad, heavy chest. He wore his gun low, with the pearl-handled butt sticking up for everybody to admire.

Hart Lake made no answer. He raised thick black eyebrows questioningly, a light smile on the thin lips beneath his black mustache.

"I heard you were back in town," Larry said steadily. "I heard you showed up flashing a fat poke." Contempt curled his lips. "Six months ago you were a bum cadging drinks."

Hart Lake tossed off his whiskey and patted his mouth with the back of his hand. "I hit a rich pocket in the Black Hills," he said. Despite his flashy clothing there was something servile and cringing in his attitude.

"Meaning you found plenty of miners willing to buy beef, and no questions asked," Larry said. "Six months ago I had some nice beef, Lake. Spring comes and my tally's way short. Too short for even a bad winter to account for it."

"Why tell me?" Lake asked lazily. His dark eyes were deep set on either side of his nose and now, looking at Larry, he seemed to be pulling them still farther back. Shielding them.

"I'm telling everyone in this saloon," Larry said. His voice was low and steady but it carried over the still, waiting silence in the room. Larry looked away from Lake and at the four bums, two on either side of him, past them to Pike Arlen nursing a beer, and then on to the ranchers at the card tables. It was Saturday, and the place was full.

"I want every man in this end of Montana to hear me, Lake," Larry went on. "I'm calling you for a rustler." He took two quick steps forward, shooting out a long arm and clamping his fingers over Lake's fancy shirt. He jerked the squat heavy man toward him. "If I see you on my land for any reason, Lake, I'm shooting—to kill."

Lake made no move to free himself. He hung, his feet barely brushing the floor, his dark skin going a dirty white underneath. He shook his head.

Larry released him and wiped his hand on his denim trousers. There was a heavy, soft sigh throughout the Montana. Pike Arlen stepped away from the bar.

"Easy, Larry." His young face, half hidden under a fuzzy black beard, was worried. "Not in here," he said.

"I've had my say," Larry announced. Turning, he walked back into the late sunlight that spotted the dusty street. Arlen followed, catching his arm.

"You drunk, man?"

Larry said tightly, "I'm done playing around, Pike. I found out the truth today." His blue eyes were bitter. "And I mortgaged everything I own to see myself through the summer."

"I'll throw in with you for my found," Pike said, still holding Larry's arm. "They dropped five of us at the Bar B. It was a hard winter all around."

"Not so hard as I had it," Larry said. He thought back to a year ago, to a fine spring day like this one. He had ridden into town on the train, a nice herd of pure-bred whitefaces bawling in the freight cars.

"I'm going to raise good beef," Larry said. What he didn't say was that he had mortgaged a good piece of his ranch to buy the stock. But good beef on good range would pay off. He took the herd

out to his ranch, turning them on to the best grass, where it sloped up into the low eastern hills. Good grass and a waterhole that had never gone dry in the twenty-five years he could remember.

Then the drought came. The old-timers said it was the dryest year they could remember. Larry was agreed on that, but he had to add that he had never seen so many grass fires. The grass grew tinder-dry under the long, hot sun, and then it would blaze up. Hundreds of acres of his top range lay blackened and burned.

"Dry lightning," they said.

Funny lightning, Larry thought, that would come on days of high wind and start where a fire could do the most damage—and then it was followed by a funny winter. His stock decided to stampede just when the worst blizzard of the winter struck. He hated to remember how many head he found piled in fence corners and in box canyons in the hills, smothered to death one on top of another.

Still, he could have made it because spring broke early this year—only his tally of live and dead cattle was far off the count he should have had. Too far off for it all to be accidents. It took a full mortgage for him to get capital to see through the long summer ahead.

Coming into town he heard that Lake was back, after disappearing in the fall. At the bank he heard how Lake was showing a full poke and spending it fast.

"He tried to buy up your mortgage," the banker told Larry.

Then he knew. Hart Lake, whose squatter parents had raised him in a line shack, hated Larry Parker. When he was drunk, he always swore he would own the land he claimed as his own. Larry shrugged it away. Lake was a town bum. The courts had backed up the Parkers in the decision that gave the land to the man who had earned it, instead of to the shiftless squatters who lived on other men's beef.

He told Pike Arlen about this briefly. Then he said, "Let's go to the hotel and get supper. I've got an idea lined up for summer."

PIKE ARLEN'S twin sister was in the hotel dining room and they sat with her. Larry, embarrassed before the pretty, dark-haired girl, ate silently, speaking only when he was spoken to. She was almost a stranger, having come up from Texas a week before, following Pike, only to learn his job of a year had played out.

"I'm working," she told them.

Pike said, "We're both good hands with cattle, Larry. When we get a stake Susan and me are going to start us a spread." He grinned at his sister. "You run along. Larry's scared with women and he wants to talk business."

Blushing, Larry rose as she left the table. He sat down again and carefully built himself a cigarette. When it was going, he said, "There are lots of ranchers who'll let me make a summer herd out of their scrub stock. They're glad to leave what grass they got left for their prime beef. I'm going to run it out by my waterhole and up into the public lands on the hills.

"Two bits a head a month," he added. "Throw in with me and make yourself a winter stake."

Pike Arlen pushed back his coffee cup. "What if Lake tries what he did last winter?"

"He'll do anything to break me," Larry said. "If he can force me out, he'll get the mortgage papers fast enough. The bank may hate him, but money'll talk." He paused and said slowly, "If he cleans out the summer herd it'll take everything I'll ever have to make it back. When I take another man's beef to herd I make myself responsible to him."

"I can shoot," Pike said simply. "When do we start?"

They rode onto the summer graze late Monday, pushing the last of the big herd to the bedding ground. Larry pushed his hat back off his red hair and looked toward the eastern hills.

"Lake'll try it," he said. "I've heard he's got a canyon back in where he can run stock through into Dakota. Those miners buy anything that's meat."

"He'll try it because you called him," Pike said. "He can't back down now."

"I gave my warning," Larry told him, flatly.

He turned back to make camp. He worked slowly, wearily. Already the strain of what he had undertaken lay heavily on him. He threw up a tent against summer storms and unloaded the supplies from the pack team. That done, he built a fire. Supper was cooked when Pike returned from pasturing the remuda. They ate in silence, washed up, and turned into their blankets with hardly a word.

Larry lay awake, staring at the clear night sky and wondering when Lake would choose to strike; and wondering too if this year's thunderstorms would bring the real rains they needed so badly.

A week of quiet passed, and each night the lack of action made him edgy as nothing else could. The cattle grazed slowly, finding the grass still good and the waterhole clean and sweet. Once they moved camp as the herd shifted closer to the hills, and once storm clouds gathered south in Wyoming only to scud over without wetting the dusty ground.

In the second week of June, Larry stood by the campfire after supper and watched black-bellied thunderheads building up in the south. They poured over the sky slowly, turning on a high-up wind. Lightning flashed in the distance and slowly came closer. The big herd began to stir as the thunder cracked nearer to them.

"Get your slicker ready," Larry said. "If it storms as big as it looks, they'll start moving."

They saddled up and rode out to the herd, reaching it as the first heavy raindrops pockmarked the dust. The lightning was close enough to smell, and the thunder made the horses jerk now when it let loose. Darkness came down fast as the clouds closed in and suddenly the rain broke. It swirled in on a hard, sharp wind, driving like sleet against their faces. The herd was standing bawling, tails to the wind. The two men worked grimly, quieting the stock, cutting back a nervous dogie here and there. Before long the cattle made only blobs in the blackness. The rain turned dust to heavy, deep mud.

Larry was on the east side of the herd, working to haze a lowing whiteface back when Pike rode hard up to him. "Coming," he said briefly.

Larry looked south, squinting into the wind-driven rain. He saw them, five shapes coming fast out of the darkness. When the lightning threw a blinding glare over the range he saw how close they were.

He clawed back his slicker to get his gun. From beside him Pike Arlen fired. As if it were a signal, five guns flamed in the night. Pike let out a sharp, surprised curse and swayed in his saddle. Larry felt lead tug at the rim of his hat and at the skirt of his slicker.

"I'm hit bad," Pike gasped, and started to slide.

Cursing, Larry thrust his half-drawn gun back into his holster and swung his horse around. He caught Pike as he began to go, pulling him off his own horse, getting him somehow in front of the horn and steadied.

"Get 'em, Larry!" Pike ground out.

"No time," Larry said grimly. He dug his heels into his horse's flanks and spurred toward camp. Behind him lightning flashed again, and when the rumbling thunder faded he thought he heard a mocking laugh.

Well, he had his choice. He could stand

and fight and let Pike Arlen die in the mud—or he could run and try to save the kid, and wait his time.

Running from Hart Lake! He had made big words in the Montana saloon and now he couldn't back them. Larry knew he should have been watching, waiting for Lake to strike. It was just the kind of night he would choose. Lake always let nature help him, as he had tonight.

Larry pulled Pike from the horse when they reached camp and carried him into the tent. A quick glance showed that he was hit low in the body. Larry bandaged the wound as well as he could and roped Pike to a pack horse. The kid was out now, and he wouldn't feel the jolting ten miles to town and the doctor.

Larry rode hard, but his mind was back with the herd. He knew what would happen back there. Lake and his men would break them into small groups, and stampede them in every direction. The prime beef they would run into the hills. What they didn't take he could have until they found the time to take them too.

He urged his tired horse on through the clinging, dragging mud. The town lights showed up and then he was at the doctor's house. When he lifted Pike down relief flooded him. The kid was still breathing.

HE WATCHED while the doctor probed the wound and pulled out the bullet. "A little more in and he'd been gutshot," the doctor said.

"Will he make it?"

"He's strong. I'd say yes."

Larry said quietly, "I want to get his sister over anyway—just in case."

He went to the hotel and brought back Susan Arlen. He watched her while she stood, dry-eyed, beside Pike. He opened his eyes, saw her, and grinned.

"Carry on, sis. It looks like I got a vacation."

They seemed to be reading something in one another's eyes but Larry could not guess what it was. Then Pike was sleeping.

She turned. "How did this happen?"

He told her in a few words, seeing the cold light rise in her eyes. She looked like Pike then, ready for a fight but quiet about it.

"You left the herd to them and brought Pike in?" she said finally.

He looked for contempt in her voice but found none. "What else could I do, Miss Susan? Are you calling me a coward?" Slow anger was rising in him.

"No," she said. "A brave man." And she turned and ran from the room.

Larry looked at the door and then at the doctor. "Do your best," he said.

"Give him two months and he'll be on his feet," the doctor answered.

Larry rode out with the excitement drained from him. The storm had passed and the cold stars were bright in a clear sky. Bright enough for him to see the shambles that was left of his camp. Lake had obviously turned a herd onto the camp, and the tent and supplies were trampled into the deep mud.

Larry turned his back on it, changed horses and rode into the hills. Even in the dark the churned trails were easy to follow. He located a hundred head before the land even started to break up sharply.

Daylight found him swaying in the saddle, but nearby a quarter of the herd was located and drifting back toward the waterhole. He went back to his camp and built a fire. Coffee under his belt, he set about straightening up. He saved what supplies he could and covered them with the best half of the canvas tent. Then he rode out again.

By dinner time he had nearly half of the herd located. Some of his own cows, mostly those of the other ranchers. He rode to camp, his mind bitter, wondering how much of the stock he would never find.

As he rode up to the hill where the camp

stood he saw smoke pluming into the air. Someone in levis and work shirt was busy cooking dinner.

Larry rode in fast and stopped. "I thought you were Pike," he said.

Susan Arlen smiled up at him. "We look something alike, sometimes." She moved a frying pan away from the fire. "I came to help," she said. "I would have been here earlier only I had to quit my work and find a horse."

"To help?" Larry blurted out. He stood spraddle-legged by the fire and made a cigarette.

"Of course," she said. "Pike and I—we need our winter stake. I can ride as well as he can." She smiled, taking the edge from her voice. "Did you expect to do this all alone?"

Larry looked at the muddy camp, at the half-tent spread over their provisions. "But—" He tried again, swallowing. "This is no kind of camp for a woman."

"While I'm here I'm not a woman—I'm a cowhand."

And she proved it to him. She let him make a frame and set up the tent but that was the only concession she took. She worked in the saddle along with him, not tiring, not complaining. Together they rounded up all but a hundred head of the beef.

Larry began to relax, to feel easy again. "There are lots of canyons," he said. "We'll find the rest of the cattle."

When the first storm of July rolled up out of the south, Larry pointed it out to her. "We've got back too much stock," he said. "Lake'll try again."

"He won't just scatter them this time," Susan said gravely. "A man who wants to break another man won't stop that quickly—not the second time."

"If I don't get him, he'll get me," Larry said. He watched the storm spread over the sky, blotting out the last daylight, sucking the wind with it. A jagged fork of lightning struck somewhere beyond them. The deafening thunder came soon.

"I'm going to be ready this time."

He threw on his slicker, pushed his carbine into the saddle scabbard, and climbed aboard his horse. He looked down at her. "Head for town," he ordered abruptly. He pulled at the reins and went fast toward the restless herd.

The darkness was swifter than before. Everything was blotted out but the white patches on the cattle. The rain was gentler this time, but the wind was sharper, cutting at him, trying to shake him from the tough range horse he rode.

He left the herd. If they drifted now they would drift as a bunch. It took men to break them up, scatter them. He rode on southeast to where the hills slipped into flatness. Lake had come from this direction before, with the wind.

Larry's fingers felt the smooth butt of the carbine. It would be five to one, with Lake's hatred against his own.

He came to the edge of a gully. Already rain was pouring water along the rocky, usually dry bed. He could hear it hiss below. He turned more to the south, into the screaming wind. There was a sloping trail a hundred yards down. Carefully guiding his horse, he eased toward it.

Once there, he dismounted and ground-reined his horse. He slipped behind a half-screen of boulders and waited, his ears trying to pry sound from the wind.

Once he thought he heard hoofs pound behind him. He turned, squinting into the darkness. There was only silence. He eased the carbine forward. It was only nerves.

AND then he did hear them—the sound of horses' hoofs squashing through the mud, the creak of saddle leather, a jangle of bridles. He got to his knees, leaning forward, his breath soft and slow for steadiness.

Lightning came suddenly, and they were outlined as if the sun had struck

them. Five riders picking their way down to the bottom of the gulch.

Larry stood now. "Lake!" he called out. "This is it, Lake!"

His answer was a gun flash and lead screaming from a boulder at knee height. Deliberately he fired at the flash. Someone screamed and there was the sound of a horse going down, splashing into the water. Grimly he pushed another shell into the chamber of his gun.

A second shot and a third—two more came on their heels. Larry threw himself to one side, hit on his belly, and fired as fast as he could work the carbine. A man cursed wildly and then he could hear them splashing through and riding up toward him.

Lightning flared again, and there were still three men. A fourth lay huddled, like a half-filled grain sack, on the mud of the other side. Of the fifth man there was no sign.

Larry fired once more, dropped the empty carbine and drew his six-gun. He could make them out, dark against blackness as they crested the side of the gulch. Guns lanced flame and something hot ripped like a knife along his side. He fired and saw one of the dark shapes pitch to one side and heard the man splash as he hit the muddy ground.

Then, from behind him, a gun opened fire. Larry twisted to one side and bullets dug spats of dirt and water where he had lain. Cursing, he snapped up a shot, and missed. The missing fifth man was explained. He should have prepared for a sneak attack. Now he was boxed in, helpless.

Suddenly a rifle roared a deep song from Larry's left. The fifth man and his horse were rigid a moment and then they plunged over the side of the gulch. Larry could hear the horse scream as boulders rumbled down crushingly.

He whipped back as a horseman from in front came on top of him, firing blindly down. His answering shot and another roar from the rifle both took the attacker. His voice roise in a high, whining shriek as he plunged into the darkness.

Then the only sound was the wind and fading hoofbeats as the last man raced down the gulch and back up the other side. Larry leaped up, staggered as the pain in his side burst into life. He caught the reins of the nearest horse and threw himself into the saddle.

Susan loomed at his side. He could make her out as the dying storm threw a last string of white lightning. She sat her horse calmly, an ancient Sharps across her saddle. He didn't question her being there. There was no time for that.

"One got away," he snapped out. "I'm trailing him." And before she could answer he spurred down the side of the gulch.

The horse under him was strange but he was tough and wiry. Larry rode him hard until he knew he had lost the track. He slacked up then until the moon broke through the last of the clouds, showing him the trail into the hills.

The first grey light showed in the east when he dropped into a canyon and smelled the heavy odor of wet cattle. The tired horse staggered a little and then broke fast.

"Like he was headed for the home corral," Larry thought, and he gave the animal its head.

Slowly the light increased until Larry could make out the huge, grassed floor of the canyon. Sheer rock walls rose on all sides of him. Below he could see beef; more than just his own missing stock. More than he believed could be hidden in the low hills.

Ahead of him hoofs rang out on rock. Larry dug his heels into his own mount, urging him. The end of the canyon was coming, a rocky height rising into the sky. He loosened his gun, tense in the saddle.

"Parker!" It was Lake's voice, the

arrogance gone, only the whine left. "My gun's empty."

Larry reined in. Lake was on his horse, not ten feet from a pole corral. Weariness showed on him in the dirty grey light. Weariness and cowardice. Larry let out his breath slowly. He took his gun and showed it plainly.

"Get down." Lake dismounted and Larry said, "Unbuckle your gunbelt and throw it on the ground. Over to one side."

Lake did as he was told, slowly. "You can't shoot a man that ain't got a gun—"

"No," Larry said. He threw his own gun down, dropped from the horse. He walked toward Lake, stepping carefully. Lake stepped back, his hands up. Larry knocked them aside and drove a fist in.

Lake ducked and kicked. Larry twisted, taking the blow on his hip. Lake kicked again, sending Larry off balance. He rushed in then, butting Larry with his head. They went down, Larry's fingers gripping Lake's neck. Lake twisted free and dove for the gun Larry had thrown down. He rose, cursing, the gun swinging.

Larry kicked himself free of the ground, driving low for Lake's spraddled legs. The gun went off as they crashed together. Larry felt the hot breath of the bullet on his cheek and then he had Lake's wrist. He turned, teeth gritted, until the gun was pointing at Lake's belly. He turned his own arm upward, raising the gun to a point level with Lake's heart.

"Pull the trigger!" Larry gritted out.

Lake's voice was a wordless sob. Larry's other hand came around, found Lake's knuckles and clamped on them, hard. He could feel the wound in his side pour blood onto the ground. His energy was going fast. He squeezed down on Lake's knuckles, crushing his fingers.

"Pull the trigger!"

The pressure was too great. Lake's fingers contracted. The sound of the .44 was muffled between their bodies. The stench of gunsmoke was in Larry's nostrils. He felt Lake jerk and then go limp, slowly. He tried to raise himself and fell.

Susan found them there at noon. Quickly she rolled Larry over and looked into his white face. His breath came slowly and evenly. She found water and poured it over his face.

"Makes two of us on vacation, doesn't it?" he said, opening his eyes.

"We'll work it out," she said softly. He saw that she was crying. "I saw the cattle. We'll make it now, won't we?"

"Sure," Larry said. "We got our winter stake made." He grinned weakly at her. "I was thinking—Pike might like to buy into my spread."

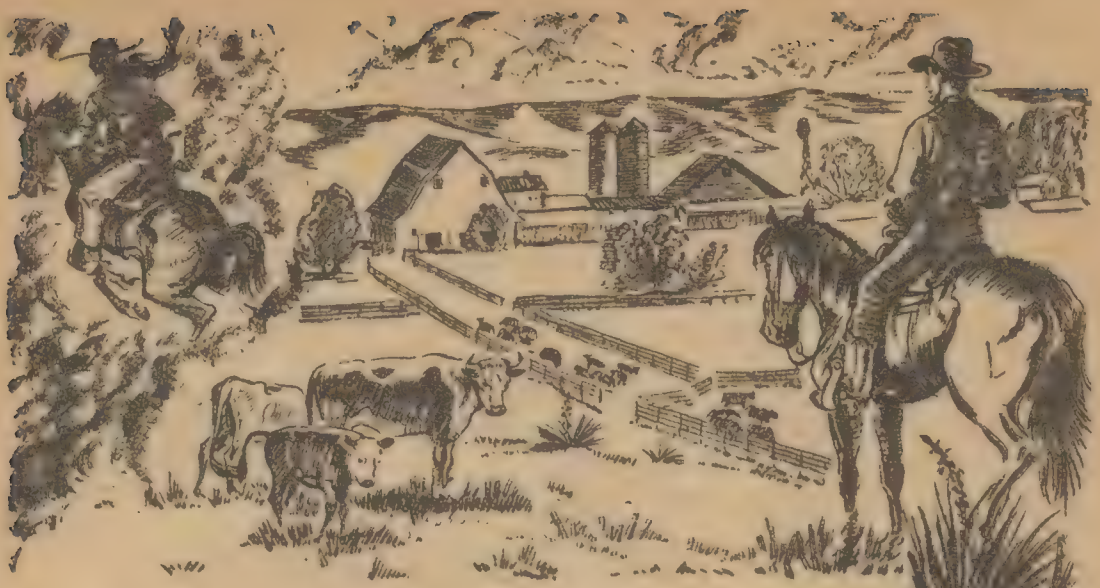
"Partners?" Her eyes widened.

"A man should be partners with his brother-in-law," Larry suggested.

Her smile was all the answer he needed.

The Way of the

On oldtime western roundups all the cows was long of horn,
An' them ol' hands that worked 'em was the toughest ever born.
They rode the toughest hosses that the open range could raise,
An' twelve to sixteen hours was their average workin' days.
They gathered cattle wilder than the bulls of Bangaloo
An' drove 'em hell-a-hootin' to the roundup rondayvoo,
To hold 'em in parada while the best men with the twine
Roped out the calves for brandin'—an' they done it rain or shine.
When hosses bucked they rode 'em by the rule of ridin' men
That when you're throwed you git right up an' climb back on again.
They took the bite of blizzards an' they swum the crick in flood,
They risked their necks to turn stampedes, an' sometimes shed their blood
When sixguns got to smokin', for there never was a hand
That wouldn't give the best he had for what he called "the brand."
They never give short measure when it come to sheddin' sweat—
They were a breed of ridin' men the West cannot forget.



Longhorns—

By S. Omar Barker

The West has changed considdable. Gone is the longhorn thunder;
A heap of fences have been built, a heap of range plowed under.
The dust of years has settled on them oldtime cattle trails,
An' nowadays most cattle ride to market on the rails.
They're shorthorns, Herefords, Angus now, instead of that ol' breed
Of shanky Texas cattle always hellin' to stampede.
But still there's beef a-growin' on a heap of western ground,
An' where there's cows there's cowboys, for there's never yet been found
A way to handle cattle that can ever hope to beat
The hired man on hossback with a saddle for his seat.
It's true them oldtime cowhands was the toughest of the tough,
But I can show you cowboys now that's plenty tough enough.
I don't mean at the rodeos—I mean out on the ranches
Where men still ride who "savvy cow" in all its many branches.
You never hear them yodel, they don't often tote a gun,
But they're still sure 'nough ridin' men who git the cow-work done!
The oldtime western cowboy was the pappy of a breed
Of rawhide ridin' rannyhans that still ain't gone to seed!

The Man Who

Fourth of Six Parts

Dead where he stood, Jesse James collapsed and thudded to the floor. . . .

"He said there was no man
With the law in his hand
Who could take Jesse James alive!"

Killed Jesse James

IT WAS recalled that Governor Crittenden was a gallant, Kentucky-born man who had "snatched a kiss from the lips of the great Patti." Who, then, was this graceful, mysterious, and unexplained visitor? Coming from no one knew where, she had been immediately granted an interview in the governor's private office. When she took her departure, the curiosity of reporters and other observers—many unfriendly—remained unsatisfied.

Complete secrecy was utterly essential, so that the governor's project of breaking up the James desperado band would be successful. The interest of Dick Liddil and Bob Ford was pressed hard by the fact of that dead Wood Hite. Jesse James suspected Liddil would surrender and confess. Also, what had become of Wood Hite? Rumors about him circulated. His disappearance would indicate that Dick Liddil had won Martha Ford-Bolton's affection.

If Jesse James learned the truth he would kill Dick Liddil; but he might overlook Bob Ford's part in the tragedy because the Ford boys were never so attentive and useful in the robber band scheme of things. Wood Hite hadn't gone to Kentucky, nor to Texas, nor west. The fact that no word came from Wood was more and more suspicious, in view of the rivalry for Martha's affection. Jesse needed money and the fuss between Hite and Liddil had put off another robbery; he wanted Hite and Liddil and the others to quit their nonsense and get down to business.

In spite of the chance that any day the news that Crittenden had "made arrangements" would break, Charles and Bob Ford joined with Jesse James. They stayed with him. More and more suspicious and angry, Jesse declared that he was going to kill Dick Liddil on sight. Thus he read Liddil out of his gang; but where was Wood Hite who was needed to take Liddil's place in the next robbery?

In addressing the jury at the trial of Frank James in July, 1883, Judge John F. Phillips summed up for the defence:

> All over the world the brave and true despise a traitor and coward. This man (Dick Liddil) is both; a coward because to save himself he would, through perjury, destroy his alleged confederate; a traitor to friendship, confidence and honor — even among thieves.

Liddil had turned square with the Missouri constitution and law, something that couldn't be forgiven by the unreformed. The attorney continued, presently:

> Circling around Liddil come the Fords and Mrs. (Martha) Bolton to swear that Frank James was in the country at the time of the robbery and homicide. What a cockatrice's nest to hatch out vipers! I dislike to assail a woman under any circumstances, but when she does fall, like Lucifer, she falls forever.
>
> Mrs. Bolton is a bad woman. Her whole family is wicked and degraded. There is neither virtue nor truth among them. For money or hate they would dare any desperate thing. The attendant circumstances of the Wood Hite tragedy in the "Bolton Castle" are enough to damn the whole family with ineffaceable infamy and perjury.
>
> Mrs. Bolton came upon the stand. She was as close as an oyster. She knew Wood Hite was slain in her own house on that Sabbath morn, when God's bright sun had arisen for the day's journey. She made no outcry for help—no demand for justice. Like a butchered hog the murder victim was carried upstairs and covered up in bed, crimson with flowing blood. During the day she entertained, with hospitable play, her

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

neighbor visitors downstairs, while this horrible corpse was upstairs, breathing no word of the awful tragedy. . . . But murder will out.

Judge Richards, speaking of Dick Liddil's surrender, stated the theory of the James band, the outlawed guerrillas:

. . . . So the conspirators and assassins fell upon the plan of informers. The state's counsel tell you that Liddil was actuated by a sense of duty in undertaking to deliver the James boys. Yes, he turned patriot—the last refuge of a scoundrel.

A mysterious bond of interest and sympathy sprang up at once between Liddil and Mr. Bolton. Mrs. Bolton, dressed in black, —appropriate symbol of death and mourning—and thickly veiled—to screen a harlot's mission—went to see the governor of the state, to open up negotiations for Liddil's and her brothers' surrender.

For the state, Hon. Wm. H. Wallace describes the Fords:

The Fords are abused and defamed by the hour by the defendants' counsel. Once they were most respectable citizens of Ray county, entertainers of chivalrous knights; but now their house is called a robbers' roost where guests are murdered and buried in the night, "unshrouded and uncoffined."

If the house of the Fords was a most disreputable place, who did as much to make it such as Jesse James?

The James gang had made the Ford house their rendezvous; they had taught the Ford boys all the ways of desperadoes, including the killing of defenceless or resisting men. Because their sister had turned her brothers from outlawry to surrender, obedience and atonement for their crimes—Martha was hated for her victory for law-loyalty.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jesse James Killed

WORD that Dick Liddil had negotiated with the authorities reached the James boys. Jesse James was furious. That was disloyalty, it was selling out, it was cowardice; mere killing was small punishment for that kind of treachery. Bob and Charley Ford heard the outbursts that marked Jesse James's anger, hatred, and fear. He was desperate in his realization that never had he needed friends more—now his circle was narrowed down to where he thought his own brother, Frank, was getting ready to turn traitor. The number of those risking being caught in *particeps criminis* after the fact constantly diminished.

But Bob and Charley Ford stayed with Jesse James, rode with him, waited for their chance. The song calls Bob Ford "that dirty little coward;" nevertheless, when Bob Ford and his brother crossed to the side of the law, they matched their nerve against the suspicion, the fears, the desperation of the most noted American outlaw in the weeks of the worst dread Jesse James had ever known. Jesse knew that Dick Liddil had sought peace with the law. The only question was when Liddil would scurry into the shelter of prison from gang vengeance.

The pale blue eyes of Jesse James flickered restlessly, searching every expression, studying every word, every motion —constantly watching the Ford boys for covert, suspicious signs.

On November 3, 1881, Jesse James moved from Kansas City, where he had lived with his wife and daughter, to St. Joseph, Missouri. He rented a house at 1381 Lafayette street, at the corner of Twenty-first street. The site was a knoll, with a view toward the south and east for miles. The rent was fourteen dollars a month. Charles Ford was with him. James took the name of Thomas Howard, Ford the name of Charles Johnson. When Bob Ford appeared, presently, he stayed in a room at the rear with his brother; his alias was Robert Johnson. The Fords kept the authorities posted on the conditions prevailing. Bob even went to Jefferson City with his sister and saw Gover-

nor Crittenden. Sheriff Timberlake of Clay county, and H. H. Craig, chief of Kansas City police, and detectives were in on the plan.

Jesse James and his family lived nearby. The Howards were very quiet people. Short of money, Jesse figured on a robbery. He chose to rob the Platte City bank and picked April 4, 1882, for the raid. He thought that would be a good date because of the murder trial starting on that day.

Dick Liddil's surrender was at hand. The Ford boys knew that the news would bring Jesse's desperation to a head. The desperado asked Bob and Liddil's plans, and if he was going to surrender. Liddil and Martha Ford Bolton were openly sweethearts. The Ford boys had visited her, as James knew. Bob Ford told James that Liddil had not surrendered. But the newspaper headlines told that Dick Liddil had surrendered, and that his confession had been promised.

Jesse James took the news calmly—too calmly. Whatever his emotions were, he covered them up. Although the boys had been with him for more than five months, not once had he appeared disarmed; and the hope of capturing him alive faded, if it had been entertained at all. His plan to attack the Platte City bank made it imperative that the boys act at once.

They knew that Dick Liddil's surrender meant confession, and Jesse James knew Martha Ford Bolton had approved the surrender—that her brothers visited her. The fact that he made no comment about Liddil was ominous—instead, he discussed the proposed robbery. They feared that Jesse James was merely waiting till he got them on the road to Platte City to kill them. He seemed to be waiting till he had them away from the St. Joe residence, which he didn't want to muss up.

They had waited at least five months to catch James at a disadvantage. Their first hope had been to catch him alive. James was strong, agile, and slender—one of the fastest, straightest-shooting men developed among the short-gun marksmen of the Quantrell guerilla band. Quantrell had taught and trained his men quick draw and fast shooting, discarding carbines for Colt revolvers—"horse pistols"—in close range work. From the Missouri border throughout the frontier of the West was spread the knowledge of their split-second marksmanship.

Not once had Jesse James given the two youths any opportunity. Now, for weeks, they had waited for a chance to get him. They had never seen him without his two revolvers—a Colt, and a Smith & Wesson.

Jessee James had trained the Ford boys to desperado technique and habits of thought—to look out for number one, to get the whack, to use treachery, to all the patient waiting for sure opportunity. James had named the hour of their departure down the road on horseback on their way to rob the Platte City bank on April 4th.

"It's an awful hot day!" Jesse James said, taking off his coat and throwing it on the bed, and puttering around killing time. "I'd better take off my pistols," he added. "People might think it strange, seeing me wearing them!"

They were 45-caliber, and made a weight of eight or ten pounds resting on his waist and hips. He unbuckled the belt and tossed them onto the bed with his coat and vest. He picked up a feather duster and stepped up on a wood-bottom chair to flick the dust off a picture frame hanging on the wall.

For the first time since they had determined to get Jesse James, the vigil of the two brothers was rewarded; they had their quarry disarmed, his hands up and his back to them. They drew their re-

volvers in the fast draw the James boys had taught them. Bob was the quicker. In that instant Jesse James hesitated as if he felt or heard creak of leather or click of hammer—but before he could think, much less act, Bob Ford had shot him.

Dead where he stood, Jesse James collapsed and thudded to the floor. Mrs James—Mrs. Howard to neighbors—ran from the kitchen into the room and screamed "Oh, my God! My God!" She accused Bob and, despite his smoking revolver, he denied shooting, exclaiming that the weapon had gone off "by accident."

The two boys ran to the telegraph office and sent messages to Sheriff Timberlake at Jefferson City and to Governor Crittenden, saying that they had gotten their man.

They went to the police station where they learned that Marshal Craig of St. Joseph had gone with a posse to the scene of the shooting. They surrendered, saying they had killed Jesse James. Few believed the eighteen-year-old killer and his twenty-year-old brother. That the quiet, mannerly Thomas Howard was in fact Jesse James seemed incredible.

News of the killing brought a crowd. Coroner Heddins took over. Undertaker Sidenfader took the body to his funeral parlor. Jesse James had been undercover for at least fourteen years, and even wartime acquaintances doubted that the dead man was that famous guerrilla lad.

The middle finger of his left hand was gone; a bullet scar was on one leg, scars of two bullets in his chest had counterparts in his back; the wound Shepherd had given him was healed over. The death bullet in the back of the neck had come out at the right corner of his lips.

Protruding cheekbones, high, sloping brow, thin lips, bony jaws, pale blue eyes, half-flaring ears, a soft, sandy beard, a wide sharp chin, a powerful, slender build despite his hundred and ninety-five pounds in weight, a half inch less than six feet tall, he "stood very straight."

A double long persisted that this man was Jesse James, but Sheriff Timberlake had known him for a long time and had bargained with Martha and Bob Ford to get the outlaw. Dick Liddil swore the body was that of Jesse James. Mrs. Zerelda James-Samuel, Jesse's mother, took the stand at the inquest, her face stern, her movements slow, her hat, dress, veil black, her bearing resolute. The body, she said, was her son's. When she left the stand she met Dick Liddil and "her whole frame quivering with excitement, she sprang toward the traitor with the ferocity of a lion," more affected by his part in getting James than by that of the Fords.

The news was received by William Pinkerton in Chicago.

"Good!" he said. "Then John Wicher is avenged at last!" The outlaws had tortured the detective to death and left him at a crossroads.

All over the union and especially in the western regions, the news was startling and needed a good deal of confirmation.

The *Kansas City Journal* declared:

> In the light of all moral reasoning, the shooting was wholly unjustifiable, but the law is vindicated, and the $10,000 reward offered by the state will doubtless go to the man who had the courage to draw a revolver on the notorious outlaw when his back was turned, as in this case.

Major John N. Edwards in an editorial in the Sedalia, Mo., *Democrat* said: . . .

> No one among all the hired cowards, hard on the hunt for bloodmoney, dared face this wonderful outlaw, one even against twenty, until he had disarmed himself and turned his back to his assassins, the first and only time in a career which has passed from the realm of an almost fabulous romance into that of history.
>
> We called him outlaw, and he was, but fate made him so. Proscribed, hunted, shot, driven away from among his people, a price

put upon his head—what else could the man do, with such a nature, except what he did do?

What he did he did, and it was fearful. But it was war. It was Missouri against Kansas. It was Jim Lane and Jennison against Quantrell, Anderson and Todd. He refused to be banished from his birth-right.

There never was a more cowardly and unnecessary murder committed in all America than this murder of Jesse James. It was done for money. It was done that a few might get all the money. It was his blood the bloody wretches were after—blood that would bring money in the official market of Missouri.

And this great commonwealth leagued with a lot of self-confessed robbers, highwaymen and prostitutes to have one of its citizens assassinated, before it was positively known he had committed a single crime worthy of death. It hires murderers. It borrows money to pay and reward murderers. It is itself a murderer—the most abject, the most infamous, and the most cowardly ever known to history. The hand that slew him had to be a traitor's!

The *Kansas City Times* reported that:

Craig and Timberlake, the principal men who engineered Jesse's capture, have been delayed and obstructed all day (April 6th) by the St. Joseph officials, through jealousy. The special train has been waiting since 10 A. M. to take the body but the city marshal would not give it up. The body was not secured until 6 P. M., to go by a special train to Kearney, Jesse's widow, children and mother accompanying the remains. They are very nervous. The body is in a five-hundred dollar coffin furnished by Craig and Timberlake. . . .

And then the commission sent up by Governor Crittenden, including Mattie Collins (an alias of Martha Ford-Bolton), Dick Liddil's wife, arrived at a late hour, viewed the remains (on April fifth) and identified the man as Jesse James. The quiet, intrepid, resourceful sister of the Ford boys thus confirmed her successful elimination of the man with whom she had so long waged combat, getting two brothers onto the side of the law to represent and enforce the law.

Mrs. Zerelda James-Samuels was the most conspicuous personage in the funeral throng; she insisted on having an official report from the train at Kansas City. She was afraid that the body would be stolen. Rev. G. M. Martin, assisted by Rev. G. R. Jones, conducted the services. "The ordinary obsequies were conducted, interspersed with vocal music. Rev. Mr. Martin delivered the address and his only reference to the character of the dead man was to say that it was too well known to need any comment. Without any expression of opinion regarding the spiritual outlook of the outlaw, he spoke only of the chances of the living, and the lesson taught by the dead."

The remains were taken to the old James-Samuels place near Kearney, where they were interred in the southwest corner of the one-acre burial tract, where "Jesse's grave looked spectral, as the sunset tinged the new-made mound with lurid gleams."

In the meanwhile, "the authorized murderers of Jesse James were interviewed at the jail by representatives of the press, and betrayed nervous anxiety regarding their fate." Up to the time of their arrest they did not seem to realize the gravity of their situation.

Bob Ford confessed to a reporter that if he had known he would have been thrown into a dingy cell, he would not have killed Jesse James.

Charles and Robert Ford were arrainged on Monday, May 17, 1882, before Judge Sherman in the St. Joseph, Missouri court, charged with murder. The youths "seemed to be wholly unconcerned," as if these proceedings were merely a formality. They acknowledged the killing and pleaded guilty of murder in the first degree. The judge was taken aback by their unconcern.

After hesitating briefly, Judge Sherman said, "Under the circumstances, there is only one thing I can do, and that is to pronounce sentence here and now. You have pleaded guilty to murder, and it only remains for me to carry out the provisions of the law; it remains for others to say

whether the sentence shall be carried out. Robert Ford, stand up!"

Robert did as commanded.

"Robert Ford," said Judge Sherman, "you have pleaded guilty before this court to murder in the first degree, and it becomes my duty to pass the sentence of death upon you. It is therefore the sentence of this court that you be taken to Buchanan County jail and there kept until the 19th of May, 1882, and at that time to be taken to a convenient place and hanged by the neck until you are dead!"

On the following day, Tuesday, May 18, 1882, Governor Crittenden upheld the state's bargain with the two Ford boys; he granted both of them an unconditional pardon for the conviction they had suffered for killing the desperado.

Upon receiving the news of the pardon, and having confirmed it, Sheriff Timberlake turned both Ford boys loose. As they staretd to leave the county jail, Sheriff Tregg of Ray county arrested Bob Ford on the charge of complicity in the murder of Wood Hite. Hite had been shot on December 5, 1881. During five months no word had been heard.

But during the excitement spreading through the river ridges, Sheriff Tregg had ridden with a posse out into hills along the mountain road that led to the Ford house. Apparently, they were just going to look at the home of the Fords, whose reputation as a hangout of the Jesse James outlaws had become widespread.

As the posse roamed toward the Ford-Bolton premises they noticed a drove of razorback hogs off to one side in the open hardwoods. The animals were crowding around, snorting and snuffling in the way of the big-headed, high-shouldered, low-hipped half-wild swine. The posse was composed of men of the river ridges who habitually made sure of what was going on.

Lifting reins on that side, the posse rode over to get a good look. They found a body which had been buried in a too-shallow grave and without a coffin. The hogs were driven away, and the authorities took over. All during the war innumerable bodies had been left by warring raiders and these had often been buried where they fell.

The coroner, sheriff, deputies of Ray county quickly ascertained that the razorbacks had unearthed the body of Wood Hite, who had been missing for more than five months. They suspected Dick Liddil, safely in jail now that he had surrendered to the state in Jackson County. Neighbors remembered that Bob Ford had indicated that now he was a full-fledged badman, like the young guerrillas of war fame.

The killing of Wood Hite wasn't under jurisdiction of the state. Moreover, a great amount of public opinion was against the killing of Jesse James, no matter what he had done. The murder of Hite was just an ordinary crime with no more excuse than any other non-political violation. It was a hanging crime. Hanging Bob Ford for killing Hite would give him justice for killing Jesse James.

Jesse James was national news. Subsequent personal and legal actions reverberated from ocean to ocean. The killing of Billy the Kid by Sheriff Pat Garret at Ft. Sumner on July 14, 1881 was chiefly of local New Mexico concern. The death of President James A. Garfield from a bullet wound on September 19, 1881, caused much less sensation.

Bob Ford was promptly tried, convicted and sentenced to hang for his part the Hite murder. Dick Liddil fared similarly. But Governor Crittenden immediately pardoned them for the killing of Wood Hite.

Bob Ford had obtained his reputation as the killer of Jesse James. He and his brother had served the state and public interest, during months of doubt, deadly peril and relentless determination, to eliminate Jesse and Frank James and their

(Continued on page 129)

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 47)

1. If your puncher acquaintance told you he was going "mavericking," you should turn him in to the sheriff. "Mavericking" means to steal calves (especially in the later meaning of the term).

2. If you had "Mexican strawberries" for dinner, you ate beans.

3. According to Western slang, "larrup" means to beat-up-on, and also means molasses.

4. "Lamp oil" is a slang term which means whiskey.

5. A "horn string" is a string attached to the saddle horn. It is used to fasten the rope.

6. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a "hooligan wagon" is a wagon used to carry water and fuel into territory where these items are not easily obtainable.

7. True. "Hog-leg" came to mean any large pistol of the so-called "pioneer" type.

8. If the ranch boss sent you out to bring in a "high-line rider," by all means you should gather your friends about you before going after him. A high-line rider is an outlaw who rides the high country—so he can spot any possible posses in pursuit.

9. Cattle are "herd broke" when they have become used to traveling in a herd.

10. True. A "hide-out-gun" is a weapon which is hidden on one's person. Often, it is carried in addition to a man's regular gun.

11. According to legend, the Hassayampa river makes a liar for life out of anybody who takes a drink from it!

12. A "head catch" is simply a method of roping an animal by the head, instead of by the feet or some other portion of the body.

13. When an animal is said to be "grass-bellied," then it is fat.

14. If the ranch boss sent you out to fetch a "gouch-hook," you should head for the kitchen. A gouch-hook is a potholder used by the cook.

15. If a cowpuncher friend mentioned a "go-easter," you should wish him a pleasant trip. A go-easter is simply a bag of a sort generally used in traveling.

16. The "git-up-end" of a horse is the rear end. Put differently, when rising from the ground, a horse generally gets up rear-end first.

17. True. A "flower rowel" is a spur with a rowel having somewhat the appearance of a flower.

18. A horse is said to be "forging," when the toe of a rear shoe strikes the heel of a front shoe.

19. True. "Fogging" means traveling at a rapid pace.

20. False. A "flash rider" is a puncher who gives the first couple of rides to unbroken horses.

GUNNIES DIE —SUDDEN—

HE WAS much too young to look upon life with such hard, old eyes. You would have thought that his always smooth-shaven face, unmarred by any scar, would have lessened his appearance of age. He was less than thirty, as lean in body as a pliant whip; his nose and chin were short and blunt.

His unruly black hair, taken with the slightly sun-squinted dark blue eyes, should have added to his appearance of youth, but somewhere on his back trail time seemed to have stopped for Stony Glynn. It had been almost an even nine years back, to be exact.

But it had been only during the past three years of saddle bumming from one short-spaced riding job to another, in some seven or eight states, that he had been plastered with the name of Stony Glynn.

His original monicker hadn't been either Stony or Glynn, but for the three years past it wouldn't have been smart to drift around with a name that had a number attached in that skin-baking hell-hole on the outskirts of Yuma. No matter the number. It had been stamped for six-odd years on the rough shoddy and the shoes he had worn. And it had been branded permanently upon that vague part of him called his soul, his spirit or his heart.

So much for this white but unemotional Indian-featured riding hand trapped for the time on the Nueces river spread owned by crippled Bill Garvin. Trapped on account of Bill Garvin's having a thigh ripped open and the bone busted by a bad *ladino* that had turned on him in the thorn-clawed south portion of the Crescent iron.

Bill Garvin hadn't any damn' business in the *brasada,* because his slow rope and his slower jughead cayuse were one helluva poor outfit for hunting strays. But if you'd told Bill Garvin that, he'd have yanked at one end of his white mustache and told you a hotter place than the August-hot spot of the *brasada* where you might pass eternity.

Getting to the nub of it, Stony Glynn was debating the ways and means of rustling fifty or so of Garvin's prime beef. Simple enough to cut the steers from the river bluff bedground. Sleepy Hemple and Jake Smith made up all of the night guard, there now being only a thousand head of market stock.

The downright truth was that Hemple and Smith and Stony Glynn were all of the outfit, with Garvin laid up. To be sure, there was the brown-faced Ollie Garvin who could ride and rope and make her six-gun draw patterns on the barn wall, but that was a long way from gut-shooting a living man. Also, she was her dad's only nurse.

Stony Glynn didn't count Ollie in, except as a possible witness to him being caught running off Crescent stock. Stony tried to regard the neatly-figured girl with the bright, shining hair, the tilted nose and natural scarlet lips, as leaning to the locoed side of the family. His first encounter with her proved it.

Ollie had read a book somewhere on making ary drab ranch stand out. When Stony Glynn, riding the grubline, first saw the Crescent home place he guessed

"Every lily-liverea coward oawis that he'd use a gun if he had one. Well, kid, here's one for you. If you wanna live, start shootin'!"

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

Stony felt the furrowing gouge of the heavy slug across his hard-muscled breast. . . .

his drinking redeye and kindred spirits had been a mistake. The Crescent iron did more than stand out.

It was, figuratively, rearing on its hind-legs and begging the neighbors not to shoot. Ollie had just finished painting the cow barn a glaring pink. The fence around the chicken yard was done in vivid purple. A footbridge across the springhouse creek was a torturing red, and only the pangs of an empty stomach

kept Stony Glynn determined to stick when a frisky whiteface bull charged his sorrel with violently blue horns.

When Stony Glynn had stopped the bull with a fast loop that tangled its forelegs, the girl Ollie looked at his well-patched riding duds and smiled approvingly.

"You sure 'nough know how to throw a string," she said, and sized up his gaunt figure. "You look like some sowbelly an' biscuits could find a home. But you come up just in time to maybe tell me if the book's wrong. That bull calf don't look like he'd oughtta have blue horns."

She had a nice dimple when she smiled, but Stony Glynn's face didn't change a line from its dust-gray granite. "All the bulls I ever seen had blue horns, ma'am," he gave solemn assurance, his eyes blank and motionless.

The way she laughed then, he should have smiled, but he'd forgotten how. The light died from her blue eyes.

Stony Glynn recollected that first meeting with Ollie Garvin now, two months later, as he studied the fiery sundown. Ollie would have to know he was an ex-con, willing to steal from a permanently crippled hombre who had befriended him and trusted him to rod the small ranch.

Dammit! It had to be that way. The perfect X formed by the gouges of lead across his breast wouldn't save the Crescent spread for the always laughing Ollie and for fifteen-year-old Pete Garvin, unless the law got him.

Kingsley Laval was itchy-fingered to cross the river and take in the Crescent. The notes Bill Garvin owed added up to but five thousand, but that much cash couldn't be raised from the thousand or so cows before the fall market drive, which would be a month too late.

"Garvin had most of the money ready until he had to pay off the docs for savin' his leg, maybe his life, at Santone. Nope, there's narv other way. The Garvins has got to know for sure I was caught rustlin' their cows. An' that lead-dug cross on my brisket is the only reward marker that'll collect the dinero."

EXCEPT for the Garvin outfit, Stony Glynn was sure he hadn't a friend. That's why he'd made sure he never showed a grin. You smiled at some galoot, next thing the jigger would be buying you a drink. Then he'd be talking up some woman critter or maybe inviting you to his shack for some chuck and a bottle. No telling where it would wind up.

"Why, like as not, they'd take on too much and start palaverin' about this and that," was what Stony Glynn kept in mind. "Up along the border the Vinegarroon, that Mex whip scorpion, had outwitted the law all the way from the California patrol to the Texas Rangers. Sure as hell is hot he'd let his tongue slip."

When he had been not much more than a hell-raising button of twenty or so, Stony Glynn had unlooped his lip about having owlhooted with the Vinegarroon. He'd never notched his gun, but he'd helped haze wet cattle up from Chihuahua.

Talked himself right into Yuma, he had. He still had two years to go when the unpredictable Vinegarroon had helped break out some older and smarter jaspers he needed. Stony Glynn was in that batch, but all he got from the great Vinegarroon was a profane kick in the seat with an order to keep on riding.

So Stony Glynn had learned to freeze his eyes and a face that wasn't marked with any perceptible difference from the features of several thousand other riders and drifters along the border from the ocean to the gulf.

Only there was the breastbone X of the sidewise bullets that had slapped him down in the ruckus with the patrol that

had knocked him from the saddle. This was emphasized on the escape reward notices sent out from Yuma through the border states.

Still without showing a smile, Stony Glynn knew he was in the trap of having made friends of the Garvins.

Ollie and red-headed Pete Garvin swung off their nags about fifty feet away from Stony Glynn. They were returning from Cross-River, a town four miles up the Nueces. Ollie was still riding herd on young Pete to keep him in the town school.

Three days a week Ollie was postmistress, mail arriving on the tri-weekly local.

"Hiya, Stony!" hailed young Pete. "That there sixshooter came in by mail order, but sis says I ain't gittin' it 'fore I'm sixteen an' git somebody that can learn me to shoot. Hey, Stony! Why're you totin' your iron? That swamp cat been chasin' the chickens?"

Stony Glynn cussed under his breath at encountering the two young Garvins while wearing his gun and rough trail clothes. For two months he'd been telling himself he had come to think about the redheaded Pete too much like a younger brother. He was too stubborn-minded to admit to himself that he'd been thinking a whole lot too much about the girl with the clear, gray, widely-spaced eyes—and not as a younger sister either.

"Yeah, Pete," he growled. "That danged cat got two hens."

Freckled Pete grinned at him. "Whyn't you take the old man's rabbit rifle. You couldn't hit the side of a barn with a six-gun. Not even that'n sis painted pink. Most folks thinks sis ain't real bright, paintin' bull's horns an' such—"

Ollie and Pete had turned, slapping the ponies through the corral gate. Ollie was making a quick reach for young Pete's big ear. Stony Glynn's face was unchanged, but the six-gun snapped into a hand that no eye could have followed.

Smoky fire belched as the gun cleared leather. Ollie uttered a quick, scared scream. Five or six feet of headless diamond-back rattler twisted and writhed. It had been coiled to strike where the girl had been about to step into scanty sand grass.

Pete had his mouth open, staring.

"Darn funny!" he exclaimed. "Told me you didn't know 'nough about shootin' to learn me to use a six-gun!"

Without changing expression, Stony Glynn said, "Damme! Had a plumb accident. If I'd tooken time to aim I'd a missed that whole danged snake a mile. Must be sheddin' and blind or it would sure 'nough give you a warnin' buzz, Ollie."

"Thanks, Stony, for that accident," said Ollie in a tone husky from fright, but Stony knew she hadn't missed the position of his six-gun where he had triggered from the hip so fast that the powder had burned his holster leather.

This was the first time Stony Glynn had toted his gun since hiring up with Bill Garvin.

Pete ran awkwardly across the yard on his gangling legs. Sister Ollie was bringing the younker up with a firm hand. But that didn't keep a leering grin from the boy's face as he came to Stony Glynn.

"S'posin' when I git my six oiled up, will yuh learn me how to have them kind of accidents, Stony? Willya, huh?"

As good a time as any to lay the beginning of suspicion, was Stony Glynn's thought.

"Prob'ly won't be 'round the Crescent much longer," growled Stony Glynn.

He had seen something in Ollie's gray eyes that he hadn't noticed before. Leaving out his cow rustling plan, that was another reason he couldn't be staying on with the Garvins.

It was like Ollie not to say too much. How any girl, especially a looker who

could put her loop on any still unbranded young rancher in the county, could be attracted by unsmiling surly eyes was something Stony Glynn couldn't understand.

Stony Glynn heeled his sorrel away to avoid more palaver. He had his old bedroll packed and waiting at the bunkhouse. He told Ollie he'd had supper and was riding out to relieve Hemple and Smith.

Holding the beef on the good grass of Swamp Creek was only a one-man chore. Since the rail-head market had come closer, there hadn't been a report of rustling along the lower Nueces for months.

The law was enforced in Cross-River county by Sheriff Bates, and not since the hunting of ladinos for their hides had there been such lack of owlhooting. Wet stuff was sometimes run across and through the *brasada,* but there weren't many Cross-River cowpokes who bothered to wear heavy, sweaty gunbelts in the hot weather.

STONY GLYNN wished he had missed Ollie and young Pete, him wearing that bone-handled six-gun. The swamp cat after the chickens was good enough excuse. But that sudden "accidental" clipping off a rattler's head from the hip was something Stony Glynn was sure young Pete didn't believe.

"Had to tote the iron, an' do some shootin' to cut out a bunch o' them cows," grunted Stony as he splashed through the river ford to the meadow where the Garvin herd was bedded down. "Maybe I'll stampede all but fifty or so, an' give Hempel and Smith a story of how they was gunsmoked."

He had the thought that, including Kings Laval's bigger herd and several other fat bunches spotted here near the border *brasada,* there would be some real rustling if the word of this pushover got to the Vinegarroon. But he guessed the feared owlhoot was too busy pushing Mex stuff across the river to take a chance with the rangers who were now rodding the Texas ranges.

"But where there ain't one kind o' thief, there's another'n takes his place," muttered Stony Glynn, holding up at the edge of the night bedding ground. "Ary other son but Kings Laval had them Crescent notes, he'd hold off on account of the old man havin' that accident. This here Laval ain't a damn mite better'n the Vinegarroon, an' a helluva lot more snaky."

While Hemple and Smith were unlikely to be rawhiding their midriffs with short gun belts, Stony Glynn knew they were armed with saddle carbines against chance varmints from the *brasada* south of the river. While Stony Glynn intended to hail the unsuspecting Hemple and Smith, to put one more clincher in his being the rustler who would afterward be caught trailing a one-man bunch of prime beef out of the Crescent herd, he had to create a good reason for a shooting that would stampede the bulk of the cows.

"It'd be downright damfunny if I'd git myself drilled by one of them oldsters," he thought, allowing himself a wide grin, such as no other person had seen on his frozen face in three long years.

Making out the mounted figure of either Hemple or Smith at a good distance in the starlight, Stony Glynn emitted a sudden yell.

"Hemple! Smith! Bunch o' riders skulkin' onto you from up the river! Might be figgerin' on cuttin' our cows! Best give 'em a few high ones from your carbines! Let 'em know we ain't asleep!"

Stony Glynn's deep voice was unmistakable. He had the six from his holster and another .45 from a saddle pocket as he called out. He had picked out the small bunch of steers bedded nighest a rough trail into the *brasada.*

As he heard Hemple and Smith trigger, wasting lead, in the air over the upriver bend, Stony Glynn put his own

sorrel between the small bunch and the bigger herd of bedded cows.

With both sixes ready to cut loose, meaning to stir the bigger herd into action, Stony's keen ears picked up the splashing of a horse being ridden through the ford he had just crossed. He had intended hazing his own "rustled" steers back across that same ford.

There was but a lone rider coming across. Stony was puzzled.

"Of all the hell's luck!" rasped Stony. "Why'd some damn' jigger hafta hit the only ford where I can chouse this bunch to the yonder side. Maybe they ain't more'n fifty or so, but like as not they'll be spooked enough to stampede an' run that fella down."

Stony reined around and headed the sorrel back to the river—without having fired a shot.

"It's so danged civilized in these parts a willin' rustler can't be let alone long enough for a one-man chore of peaceable cow stealin'," muttered Stony, sighting the shadowy rider.

Then Stony heard the shrill voice of young Pete Garvin.

"Hiya! That you, Stony? Got my new six workin', but I busted a window tryin' it, so I got a notion I'd catch up with you an' do some swamp cattin' 'fore sis found it out!"

While he was dead set on being nabbed as a rustler who'd run off a bunch of beef from crippled Bill Garvin, his best friend, he had a queazy feeling in his innards that he didn't want this red-headed, freckle-faced kid to be the one to put that Yuma record onto him. Damn that red-headed button, he'd taken to Stony until he had the prison dodging ex-con softened up to helping him do his readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic at nights.

Stony had a sudden notion. Stirred by the saddle gunfire, the main body of the Crescent herd had started milling.

"Gimme that six-gun 'fore yuh shoot off one o' your flop ears, Pete!" demanded Stony. "Then mosey over there an' help Hemple and Smith hold them cows. Reckon they was shootin' at a bobcat and got the critters all stirred up."

Stony saw that the small, separated bunch of prime yearlings was still holding off from the other steers. It was tough, but now he judged it'd have to be this way. Young Pete would know he had misplaced his faith in the best bronc buster and roper the Nueces had ever seen. Stony decided, sadly, that was the way it had to be.

"Huh-uh, Stony!" exclaimed young Pete, pulling his pony away. "If they're shootin' at a bobcat, I'm gittin' in on it."

Stony was thinking, might as well be young Pete as Ollie or ary of the others knows I stole that yearling bunch.

BY THIS time Hemple and Smith sent the third or fourth round of saddle gun lead skyhooting up the river. To Stony Glynn's complete surprise, that shooting seemed to have touched off a powder keg.

Gunfire now blazed in a red rim from the river bend above. It pounded promiscuous lead from no less than a dozen rifles and six-guns. Thundering over the Crescent herd was probably more gunsmoke than had been burned at one time in the past several years over the lower Nueces.

Stony jumped his sorrel toward young Pete's pony. He intended either to knock the redheaded younker to the ground or turn him on a run back across the river ford out of the line of fire. Stony's good intention was abruptly changed by the pounding of a carbine bullet with sickening force into the point of his left shoulder.

Stony felt the furrowing gouge of the heavy slug across his hard-muscled breast and the final solid impact of the lead in

the tough, lean flesh of his right arm. That last hammering blow jerked Stony's hand from the sorrel's rein and for spaced seconds he had the empty sensation of falling through space.

Just before hailing young Pete, Stony had been gripping both of his sixes, all set for trying to stampede the Crescent herd and pull that slick rustling trick of cutting out the small bunch for himself.

"I might-a knowed I'd overplay my hand," grunted Stony before the hard ground came up to meet him and a chunk of river mud, dried like 'dobe brick, put a black void where his stubborn brain had been.

Stony's sorrel went down with lead behind one ear, its weight missing its rider, but the body pinning his left leg with his foot still in the stirrup. From the split second of his statement that he had overplayed his hand, Stony Glynn had no further word or thought upon what he might have meant.

But Stony's mind had jumped back to earlier that day when he had ridden a back trail into Cross-River. He had cut his visit so short he was convinced he had missed being seen by any of the few Cross-River folks he knew. He had met the tri-weekly train just in time to slip a penciled letter of his own into the lot coming to the town.

Slow-moving, easy-going Sheriff Bates had a letter in that mail, unsigned. Three years from the pen at Yuma had been a long time. But the letter contained a small reward notice that gave but a vague description of an escaped convict, Chad Martin, No. 3,578, who had the same dark hair and eyes of possibly ten thousand other men of medium size in the border states.

The only distinctive identification mark given was a peculiar scar, a perfect X made by the wounds of two bullets, about four inches below the neckband. This was received when Chad Martin was knocked from his horse in a running fight between the Arizona patrol and the border runners headed by the notorious Vinegaroon. The sum of $5,000 would be paid on his return to Yuma.

That was all, except for two penciled lines.

"A cowhand resembling this escaped convict is reported working under another name on a ranch of Cross-River county. He could be planning a rustling raid to rejoin the Vinegarroon."

Stony Glynn had mailed that old reward notice and addressed the envelope to Sheriff Joe Bates.

It was of this Stony had thought when that unexpected gunsmoke had blazed into the Nueces night. Sheriff Bates, with his drooping mustaches, might not have been half so sleepy as his half-lidded eyes indicated.

Stony Glynn recollected having done some pencil writing on a bill of sale for Crescent cows, half a dozen breed stock, which Sheriff Bates had bought up. That had been while Bill Garvin was having himself patched together in the hospital at Santone.

If he'd had time to think it over before 'dobe baked ground smacked him into oblivion, Stony Glynn might also have thought of Ollie Garvin acting as postmistress three days a week. . . .

The world tilted up on one edge and Stony Glynn hung on to keep from rolling off into space. Then the ground seemed almighty soft and the earth settled down.

But there were voices, a murmur that separated into individual tones. Stony could hear, but he couldn't see on account of his eyes being blindfolded. He wanted to move, but he guessed when he'd been caught rustling that Crescent stock, old Sheriff Bates had been too smart to take any chances with an owlhoot who had ridden with the widely hunted Vinegarroon.

For Stony discovered his arms were bound tightly to his sides. That left only the murmuring voices that became clearer. The slow, drawling speech of Sheriff Bates was most marked.

"Sure 'nough, it ain't no difference if yo' all think he's a locoed button, he stopped the first rustlin' raid we've had in five years, an' he gits all that Arizona reward dinero," said Sheriff Bates. "I've been thinkin' on it, an' it'll come in time to cut Kings Laval down to size. You'd oughter be a'mighty proud o' havin' him for a brother, Ollie."

Dammit! It had to be the redheaded kid that got him, after all, thought Stony Glynn. Whyinell couldn't it have been Hemple or Smith, or even Ollie. Hell! That freckled, little jigger had looked up to him, thought he was somebody. That meant young Pete had lost something of faith, an illusion to be sure, but still one thing that once gone would not return.

"Yes, Sheriff Bates, I'm proud of him." It was the voice of Ollie, but her tone didn't match her words. "All the same, I'm gonna tan his breeches so's he'll have to stand up for a week. He's got what you call guts, but he'll get the seat worn off his pants every time I see him even looking at a six-gun."

"But, sis, it was a downright accident, like Stony said he shot off the head of that rattlesnake—" Young Pete's shrill voice started to plead.

"Take yourself outside and stay in the buckboard until we're ready to start home, Pete Garvin!"

Stony Glynn didn't want to listen any more. His reward idea had worked. He guessed he'd started that yearling bunch across the ford into the *brasada*.

Right now he was thinking how much better it would have been if that last carbine slug had done for him. Then Sheriff Bates and Ollie were bending over him.

"I'd take that bandage off him, but he's cut over the eye where he hit the ground," said Sheriff Bates. "Don't you go for tellin' young Pete that he ain't got guts, Ollie. Yo' all keep him thinkin' he has, an' he'll have 'em. Dangnation, when Stony Glynn got shot off his hoss, young Pete was so all-fired skeered he whanged away with his new six-gun, an' then with the two Stony was totin'. The Vinegarroon an' his bunch had to cross that ford, an' Pete killed the Vinegarroon an' two of his owlhoots that'll put that reward up to fifteen thousan' or more."

Stony Glynn made himself limp as if he hadn't heard. But he was still thinking of that Yuma reward notice, and the X marked on his brisket.

Sheriff Bates said, "Yuh know, Ollie, that bullet rip across Stony Glynn's breastbone ain't none serious. Damfunny though, I was thinkin' some o' lookin' up Stony and findin' out if he had an X bullet scar, after gittin' that reward notice. But if there had been such an X mark, this new lead gouge didn't leave it.

"Hemple and Smith said Stony rode up in time to warn 'em of the Vinegarroon rustlers comin' down the river," said Ollie calmly. "I recollect, sheriff, seein' that reward notice letter, and stamped it for your office. Stony's been helping Pete with his writing, so it couldn't have been him put your name on the envelope."

Stony Glynn held his breath.

"Nope," d r a w l e d Sheriff Bates. "There's was pencilin' on the reward notice, too. I've got a bill o' sale with Stony's writin' on it. They ain't nothin' alike. Anyway, I lost that damn' reward notice some'eres. You've been figgerin' on Stony stayin' perm'nent, Ollie?"

"Between you an' me, sheriff," said Ollie quietly. "He hasn't got around to askin' me. But I'm figuring on having him do that as soon as I'm ready. Maybe he'll think it's an accident like shooting the head of a rattlesnake, but it won't be."

Death Rides the

CHAPTER ONE

Blood for Toro

JIM BORRUM sighed and opened his eyes, and for a long moment saw nothing but a wavering dark blur, which was the roof above his head. There was a dull, pulsing ache behind his eyeballs, but otherwise his head felt like an empty shell, and there was a queer humming in his ears, like the tune a high wind

High Trail

A bullet whistled past his ear, as he scrambled into the saddle and yanked the grulla around. . . .

By KENNETH FOWLER

plays on a taut wire. He sighed again.

Gradually, the humming merged with a sound of voices that struck at the edge of his consciousness like muffled bell strokes, swelling and fading in a kind of lulling rhythm that finally made him

"I'm gonna take you in, mister. It's up to you whether it's in a saddle—or across one!"

drowsy again, and when he closed his eyes, the sound seemed to float away, receding into unreality.

Then suddenly the voices floated closer, and a hand curled around the collar of his shirt, gripping it and shaking him. Something cold touched his lips and a streak of liquid fire ran down his throat. A flat voice intoned: "That oughta bring him around. How you feelin' now, pardner?"

The liquor burned downward into his belly and spread its warmth through him, and presently he opened his eyes fully, and saw the face. It was a long, narrow-jawed face, with peering, bullet-small blue eyes.

"Give him another nip, Nopal. One more oughta do the trick."

He felt the lip of the bottle pressed to his mouth. He jerked back his head as the raw whiskey stung his throat, making him gasp.

"Recognize us now, don't you, Borrum —Scotty Daw and Nopal Jackson? You remember what happened, pard?"

The mist was clearing in front of his eyes, and the tiny pulses beating behind his eyeballs eased their pressure slightly.

"Daw? You're Daw?" His voice sounded strangely remote, and his tongue felt like a thick wad of cotton stuffed into his mouth. "Stage—I remember. You—"

"You got it, pard," Scotty Daw cut in, before he could finish. "You got it fine now, Borrum." Staring down at the man on the bunk, his thinned blue eyes were blandly mocking. "We held it up for the bullion shipment from the Black Mines—remember? I had Skene in my sights, but my cayuse got boggy-headed and I creased you by mistake. But we got the bullion, pardner. Two bars—forty thousand dollars' worth. And the way you gun-whipped Skene was a caution. You done fine, pardner."

Jim Borrum gasped. "Skene! I gun-whipped Skene? You're loco! Why should I—"

Bearded, red-headed Nopal Jackson threw out a flat hand at him as he tried to straighten up in the bunk. The hand hit him in the face and he fell back, groaning.

"Aw, come on, Scotty," Jackson growled. "His brains're still ginnin' around. We gotta make tracks."

Scotty Daw's narrow, sharp face twisted sardonically. "Too bad to leave a pardner like this, Nopal, but I guess you're right." His voice jeered, "But you don't worry, Jim, me and Nopal don't deal from the bottom with a pard. You're gettin' one whole bar, just like we promised. It's stashed under your bunk here."

He started to turn away, then halted, grinning, and glanced back. "You'll be safe here, till you feel like ridin' again. You're in the old Loop L line shack, up back of Hatchet Mountain."

"Wait!" Borrum blurted after them hoarsely. "I don't know what kind of dirty deal you two are cooking up, but—"

Nopal Jackson heeled around abruptly. With surprising agility for a man of his bulk, he stepped to the bunk lightly as a cat.

"You heard Scotty," he snapped. "We could have cold-decked you easy, but that ain't our style. And now you got the gall to bellyache." His fist knotted and darted at Borrum like the wedged head of a rattler. Light burst in front of Borrum's eyes and sprayed down in a fountain of rainbow mist.

A few minutes later, the jingling sound of saddle gear came from outside the cabin, and then the staccato muffled thud of hoofbeats, going away.

Jim Borrum heard nothing.

Later, how much later Borrum could only guess, he drifted back to consciousness with Scotty Daw's words re-echoing through his head like angry pulse beats. *You're gettin' one whole bar, just like we promised. It's stashed under your bunk here.*

A whole bar! Was he crazy, or was

Scotty Daw? A couple hours ago Scotty Daw had held up the Visalia Stage in Pothook Canyon, and, as was plain enough now, Nopal Jackson, the shotgun guard, had been his confederate. Things were coming a little clearer, now; thoughts were taking shape, like objects revealing themselves gradually through a cloud of settling dust. Dust as it had spurted up around the stage in Pothook Canyon, when he had abruptly hauled back on the ribbons in response to Scotty Daw's barked command: "All right, you men on the box! H'ist 'em, and keep 'em h'isted!"

Sheriff Dan Skene had been riding on the box at his left, and at Skene's left, shotgun between his knees, had been Nopal Jackson, the regular gun guard. Skene had told him and his stage line partner, Branch Isbell, in notifying them of his intention to ride gun guard with Jackson on the hundred-mile journey to Toro Junction, that the shipment of forty thousand dollars of gold bullion they had been carrying for the Minas Prietas Company required the precaution of an extra guard. Skene had certainly shown a justifiable apprehension, he thought now.

Borrum groaned. If he could only remember what had happened in those few tense moments after Scotty Daw's voice had whipped down at them from the rimrock. He could clearly recall just two things: Daw's clipped command to halt the stage, and the spanging reverberation of the two shots Daw had fired. In the next moment something had crashed against his skull and he had been thrown forward against the dashboard, unconscious. When he had finally regained consciousness he was here in this abandoned line shack.

A GROAN burst from his tightly compressed lips, as he tried to straighten up on the bunk, and a hammer of pain flipped up and slammed against the tender shell of his skull. Easing his feet down, he sat motionless on the bunk for a long moment, fighting a wave of nausea.

He looked around the delapidated shack and finally managed to stand. Hanging on to the wall for support, he reached the front window, he looked out, and then stiffened with surprise. A saddled horse he had never seen before—a wiry, short-barreled little grulla—stood picketed outside the door.

Had Scotty Daw and Nopal Jackson left this horse here for him—and if so, why? He rubbed a tired hand across his aching eyes, then took it away. It wasn't an hallucination. The grulla was still there.

Groggily, he shook his head. The deeper he got into this, the less sense it seemed to make. And to add the final bizarre touch to the nightmare, Scotty Daw had told him, with complete seriousness, that they were leaving his division of the spoils under the bunk!

He had the grim, solid conviction, that there would be no gold under the bunk; Daw and Jackson weren't philanthropists. Why had they been at such pains to make it appear that he *had* been in the hold-up?

Well, he certainly would get no closer to the answer by staying here. He'd rest a few hours, and then ride back to Minas Prietas and talk to Branch. And to Dan Skene, if Skene was still alive.

He turned, unsteadily, and started back to the bunk. A shaft of mid-afternoon sunlight speared through a broken side window of the shack and flung a golden arrow across the floor. At the foot of the bunk, the arrow-tip struck on a dingy yellowish object and shot back a dazzling reflection.

With a startled gasp, Borrum sprang forward. His heart leaped up and thudded against his ribs as his trembling fingers closed around a bar of thick, dull-gleaming bullion. Here, without the shadow of a doubt, was one of the two bars of bullion

broken from the strong box of the Visalia Stage—a bar of gold worth ten thousand dollars. Incredible as it seemed, Scotty Daw had been telling him the truth.

Stunned, he stood staring down at the precious metal as if it were a coiled rattler, poised to strike. Instead of shedding light on the mystery, this gleaming bar of treasure only made it more inexplicable.

The sounds that came presently from outside the cabin were vague and unreal to him—the muffled stomp of hoofs, then the faint, musical jingle of bridle chains. He didn't turn until it was too late, until the voice slammed at him from across the room.

"Don't make any quick move, Borrum. Just turn around, and keep your hand away from your hip."

Turning, he recognized the square, blocky shape of Sheriff Dan Skene filling the doorway. Behind Skene, the dark, quick eyes of Branch Isbell darted into the room.

Borrum relaxed and said, "It's all right, Dan. They were here less than an hour ago. Their sign should be easy to cut, if you push out right away."

Skene's pale blue eyes held him with prolonged intensity. The blue-barreled Colt in his hand remained leveled as he came on into the room followed by Branch Isbell.

Skene said tonelessly, "Shuck his hardware, Branch." Then, "Maybe we figure, Borrum, a bird in the hand's worth two in the brush."

For a shocked moment, Borrum stood tensed. He stared at Branch Isbell until Isbell's eyes shifted away; Skene's remained cold and inscrutable. "Are you two loco?" he blurted finally. "You don't think I—"

Isbell's hand at his hip checked the words. He felt his Colt slipped out of its holster. Then Isbell was backing quickly away from him.

Shaking his head, Isbell looked at Borrum. "What made you do it, Jim? You know it's an uphill grind, getting a stage line started. But if you'd had a little more patience—"

Jim Borrum exploded. "My God, has everybody around here gone crazy at the same time? I thought I was the crazy one, when I came to in this shack with Scotty Daw and Nopal Jackson nursing me on a bottle of redeye and blathering some loco talk about making a split. They were here, I tell you! And if you'd quit all this damned whittle-whanging and start sloping, you could likely be cutting their sign before dark."

Skene's dry, level voice made its ironic thrust into the silence. "And leave you, I suppose, with that." He nodded to the bar of bullion protruding from the bottom of the bunk. "Looks like Daw and Jackson did more than just talk about a split, Borrum."

Borrum tensed. "You really believe that, Skene?"

Skene scowled. "It ain't a question of what I believe. There's the evidence—" he nodded again to the bullion—"and evidence is what I have to go on, regardless of who it hurts. I'll have to take you in, Borrum."

Branch Isbell stared frowningly at the sheriff. "I don't see how that's going to accomplish anything, Dan. I'd say we give Jim a chance to clear out of the country and start with a clean slate somewhere else. He'll be punished enough, losing his partnership. And with this much of the gold recovered, we'll be off to a pretty good start with the Minas Prietas people."

Watching Skene, now, Borrum suddenly felt a curious remote separation from this scene, as if he were a spectator at it instead of a participant, and without surprise he saw Skene's veiled eyes hunt over him thoughtfully.

Skene muttered, "Well, I don't like to do that, Branch. It would mean my job, if anybody got wind of it." He looked at

Jim Borrum again. "You'd have to get clean out of the country, Borrum, and stay out of it."

Borrum swung his flat gaze from Skene to Branch Isbell. "This begins to smell pretty rotten in my nose, Branch. I put two thousand dollars in Visalia Stage Lines—remember? It wouldn't work out too bad for you, would it, losing your partner just as the lines are beginning to show a profit?"

Skene's voice hardened angrily. "You see, Branch? You do this my way, you'll quit all this anti-godlin' around and let him face a judge and jury."

Slowly, Isbell shook his head. "No, I want him to have a chance, Dan." He strode to the bunk and picked up the bar of bullion. He said to Dan Skene, "We've got his gun. Come on, let's get this back to the office."

At the doorway he turned, glancing back. "I gave you a good piece of advice, Jim. Make a clean start some place where you're not known. There'll be a posse organized as soon as we get back to town, but you'd ought to make it to the border before then. From here on, it's up to you."

Curtly, Borrum swung his glance to Dan Skene. "You were on the stage, Skene. Maybe you figure that bullet I got was just part of the act. It didn't feel like it—to me."

Skene said with dour emphasis, "I don't know what happened to you when the fireworks started, Borrum, but I know what happened to me. Jackson knocked me out cold with the barrel of his gun. When I came to you were gone—and so was the bullion."

Branch Isbell pushed impatiently at Skene's shoulder, sending him out through the doorway.

"This gold tells the story, Jim. Next time, I'll play it Dan's way."

A cold fury rose in Jim Borrum as he strode to the door. He said flatly, "Give my regards to your friend Nopal, when you see him." Angrily, he flung a hand against the door and slammed it shut.

THE small, four-roomed frame dwelling where Carla Ware kept house for her brother Steve showed a light in the living room window as Borrum halted his grulla a half-block away, and eased himself down painfully from the saddle. The pain behind his eyes had subsided now to a dull ache, but any sudden movement still shot hot, torturing arrows up through his head.

He looked carefully up and down the darkened street before moving toward the house. He was almost to the door when a sound of voices abruptly checked him. The sound was a low murmuring from behind the door panel; then the latch clicked and the door opened a crack, spilling a tapering shaft of light across the porch boards.

He moved quickly back out of the light and darted around to the side of the house. Simultaneously, the front door creaked and sprayed a widening beam of light across the veranda. Then, startedly, he recognized the voice of Branch Isbell!

"Skene wanted to bring him back," Isbell was blandly explaining, "but I convinced him it would be better to let him ride on. After all, he had been by partner, and I figured I owed him that much of a chance."

Carla Ware's soft, gentle voice floated into the interval. "I still can't believe it, Branch. Jim Borrum! It seems incredible!"

A quick warmth melted a little of the coldness from Jim Borrum's belly; then there was Isbell's suave, deliberate voice again.

"I felt the same way about it, Carla. But there's no doubt that's the way it happened. Jim was in it with our shotgun

guard, Nopal Jackson, and this Scotty Daw. They knocked Skene out before he knew what was happening."

"Well, I'm thankful you're transferring Steve to the Steeldust office, Branch. He's been seeing too much of that crowd of Chance Laverne's, at the High Card. And he hasn't been himself lately. It's worried me."

"Frankly, that's why I decided to transfer him, Carla. Laverne himself told me he had Steve's I.O.U. for five hundred dollars. I figured the quicker I got him away from Laverne's influence, the better it would be for him."

"I'm really grateful to you for that, Branch. Steve's only nineteen, you know. And since dad died, he's everything I've got."

Isbell's voice came in now with a bland insinuation that started Jim Borrum's heart pounding.

"Steve doesn't have to be everything, Carla. You know what I mean by that. We could keep a tighter rein on Steve if we were together and—"

"Please, Branch! I told you I didn't feel like talking about that tonight."

"Sorry! We'll forget about it—for tonight. But don't forget what I said about that investment angle. Now that I've lost Jim I'll be needing another partner, and if you put up that five thousand your dad left you, I can promise you'll triple your money in six months. I'm buying out Tom Gibson's line, over at Indian Gap, and I think we can pull in Cal Bixby, too, once we get Gibson. Then Visalia will control every stage route in the county—and we won't stop there, either."

"I'll think it over, Branch. And thanks for letting me know about Jim."

"I wish it could have been a different kind of news, Carla. Well, don't forget that proposition. I'll drop around tomorrow for your decision."

"I'll let you know after I've talked with Steve," Carla promised, and then Branch Isbell's footfalls were fading down the path, and Jim Borrum heard the front door softly closed.

For a long moment he remained tensed, a motionless shadow there in the dark. It was plain to him, now, that Branch Isbell himself had engineered that holdup. And he had done a good job. He had pulled the wool over Dan Skene's eyes completely. And his former partner for the goat—the partner who had consistently opposed his schemes for wildcat expansion until such time as they had their line solidly established and were running it unencumbered at a profit—he would be free now to try any skulduggery that fitted his purpose to bring Gibson and Bixby to heel, and force them to sell out.

He stiffened suddenly, struck by a new thought. The bullion! Tom Gibson had said, a month ago when Isbell had approached him on the subject, that he wouldn't sell the Indian Gap line for a penny less than ten thousand dollars. And Bixby, a successful operator in the northern part of the county, would want an equal amount, maybe more. Obviously Branch Isbell intended to convert that bullion he'd found at the shack into cash, and use it to build up Visalia into the biggest staging outfit in the state. But how could he do that, with Skene having been present at its recovery? No, that couldn't be it. But he could have made a deal with Nopal Jackson and Scotty Daw. Jackson and Daw could sell their bar, and turn the proceeds over to Isbell in exchange for an interest in Visalia. Then, with Carla Ware's five thousand tossed into the jackpot, they could buy out Indian Gap, at least!

THOUGHT of Carla sent his thoughts spinning off on a new tangent. Carla could be the reason Branch hadn't had him killed outright,

back there at Pothook Canyon. He wouldn't want it to appear as if his partner had died in the act of defending the stage. That way, he would have seemed a martyr, a hero, in Carla's eyes. And Branch Isbell was in love with Carla Ware himself.

Now, gliding out from the wall, Jim Borrum stepped softly up to the veranda and rattled the door knocker.

Presently a sound of footsteps came through the house. Then the door swung open and Carla Ware stood outlined in the faint light from the living room.

"Jim!" She spoke his name with a startled gasp, then stepped back, her eyes widening on him in abrupt panic.

"You don't have to be frightened," he said quietly. "Nobody saw me come here. You've got to hear my side of the story, Carla. That's why I took a chance, and came here first."

"No! No, you mustn't! Please, Jim!" She had her hand on the latch as if to shut the door, and with a sudden angry movement, he thrust his foot into the opening.

"I'm coming in, Carla," he said flatly. "And you're going to listen to me—whether you want to or not."

"But Jim! If you're seen here, if you're caught—" Her breath caught. "All right, come in," she breathed out at last. "I'm sorry, Jim, if I seemed curt. But seeing you like this, right after Branch's visit—" Her voice faded into a sigh, and she moved aside for him to enter.

In the living room, he wasted no time "Carla," he said, "Branch lied. I hardly saw any of the hold-up. Something hit me—Daw's bullet, maybe, or maybe the barrel of Jackson's gun. When I recovered consciousness, I was in that old line shack, up back of Hatchet Mountain. Daw and Jackson left me there—with one of the bars of bullion hidden under my bunk. That's where Skene and Branch found me. And I think Branch knew I would be there."

He watched the look in her eyes change to one of startled shock. "I didn't believe Branch, Jim, not at first. But then he told me you wouldn't be back, that you had run away. He said there would be reward dodgers posted for you within a week. That's when I—" She stopped, her lips trembling. "Oh, Jim, I feel so terribly mixed up tonight! Everything seems so—so topsy-turvy."

Borrum's voice thinned grimly. "It seemed pretty topsy-turvy to me, too, Carla, until I got thinking about you. Then I began to realize how perfect this might be for Branch, if I was out of his way." He glanced at her obliquely. "Maybe you know what I mean."

Sudden color flooded Carla Ware's cheeks. "I never felt about Branch the way I do about you, Jim. But you never said anything—not in so many words. And I thought—"

Jim Borrum cut in awkwardly, "I figured that could wait till we got the line established, and I had a little money coming back from my investment. I'm the slow and careful kind, Carla. Sometimes I wish I wasn't. Maybe it's not the right system—with a woman."

Her flush deepened. "You should know that money would never make any difference to me, Jim." She met his glance squarely. "But I still don't understand about Branch. If Skene was with him when he found that bar of bullion under your bunk—"

"I know—that would mean Branch would have to acknowledge its recovery. But he could still have made a deal with Daw and Jackson for the other bar. Branch is ambitious—he wants to run Gibson and Bixby out of business, or buy them out. Well, we have no money for that kind of expansion, at least not now. But suppose he offered Daw and Jackson

an interest in the line in exchange for whatever they could get on the sale of their bar? With that, and whatever he could finagle you into putting into the business, he could buy out Gibson."

"It's hard to believe Branch would do a thing like that to you, Jim." Her voice quickened into concern. "But if that is it, what can you do? Branch could talk Skene into letting you go, but suppose the Minas Prietas owners call in a United States Marshal? You'll be hunted—"

Borrum's voice cut in flatly: "That may be the weak spot on Branch's scheme, Carla. He figures he's fixed it so I'll have to get out of the country. But that's the one thing that may give me a chance to locate Daw and Jackson and try to pry the truth out of them. They wouldn't be looking for me here, of all places. And I want to see Steve before I leave. If he keeps his ear to the ground, Isbell might let something drop that would help me. I'd like to see Steve tonight, if I could."

Carla shook her head. "Steve thinks you're pretty wonderful, Jim; there's nothing he wouldn't do for you, I'm certain of that. But wouldn't it be risky, trying to—"

Borrum said: "From here on, everything will be a risk, Carla. But that's the chance I'll have to take. I heard you mention the High Card, before. Do you think Steve might be there?"

"I'm afraid so, Jim. It's where he's been spending most of his free time, lately. But you couldn't go there!"

"I know. But I'll talk to Hank Renssler, at the stables. I can trust Hank, and if Steve's around, he could find him for me." He rose. "Well, I reckon this is good-by, for now, Carla."

"Good-by, Jim. I'm sorry if I seemed to doubt you, before. But that first shock —I've been so bewildered—"

Suddenly she was following him across the room. He stood at the door, his hand on the latch, and a strained awkwardness fell between them momentarily.

"I—I forgot one thing, Jim." He could catch the cool, clean scent of her hair, could see the look in her eyes, at this moment, that he had yearned to see there since first coming into the room. Her lips were a warm, sweet pressure against his mouth, and then she was pushing him abruptly away, and he could hear her muffled sob as he stumbled out to the veranda, and the door closed gently behind him.

Outside the Visalia Stage Stables, two blocks downstreet, he reined in and stepped down, moving into the dark alley between the stable and Jeff Landry's feed store. Through a cobwebbed window he could see Hank Renssler puttering around in the stable office.

Quickly, he turned and cat-footed back to the street. As he did, he saw the swing-doors of the High Card, a half block farther downstreet, burst open suddenly and a tall figure step out from the vanishing splash of light and fall into a slightly unsteady walk. The street seemed empty, except for this one somewhat uncertain stroller, and he was on the point of stepping out from the alley and ducking into the doorway of the stable when something familiar about the oncoming pedestrian halted him with a suddenly checked breath.

He waited, tensed, for what seemed the endless time it took the lanky figure to reach the corner, and then light sprayed out from the Old Corner Saloon, striking upon the fan's face, and with dull shock Jim Borrum recognized Steve Ware.

He called softly. "Steve!" and at the same instant the shot blared from the dim alley separating the Old Corner from Jake Lingle's saddle shop, and Steve Ware lurched drunkenly. For a painfully prolonged moment, he seemed to teeter indecisively on his high-heeled boots; then,

with a leisurely, sickening sway, he tipped forward and fell aslant the high board walk, his head hanging loosely over its edge, one arm dangling grotesquely.

Jim Borrum broke instinctively into a run. He reached the sprawled figure and with careful gentleness turned it over. A cold fear beat up in him as he stared down into the glassy, staring eyes. Steve Ware was dead.

Boots were pounding along the board walk, and from inside the Old Corner there were suddenly uplifted voices and a blur of sounds: boots clumping, tables scraping back, the brittle crash of a glass smashing upon the floor.

Jim Borrum straightened, filled suddenly with a spurting fear. If he was caught now, it would be the end. Skene would pin this murder on him, and already he was a hunted fugitive, with a price on his head.

He ran for his horse, conscious of old Hank Renssler staring at him with panic-spread eyes from the doorway of the stables. Somewhere out of the darkness a voice leaped: "There he goes!" and a bullet whistled past his ear. He scrambled into the saddle and yanked the grulla around. He spurred mercilessly. The voices faded to a confused murmur behind him; the grulla became a fleet shadow, blending into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

Last Chance Trail

THE railroad boom town of Steeldust was the western terminus of the Visalia Stage Line from Minas Prietas, approximately eighty miles to the southwest, and was currently the end-of-steel for the onpushing Arizona, New Mexico & Southern, now poised at the settlement for its next westward leap of shining high iron. Jim Borrum reached it on the third night of his journey from Minas Prietas, after cautious stops at the three intervening stage-stop towns of Bluefields, Ocotillo and Saber Creek. In none of these places, however, had he cut the sign of Scotty Daw and Nopal Jackson.

He had lost the posse that had taken after him following Steve Ware's murder back at Bluefields. There was satisfaction in that; but there was no satisfaction in the fact that the real killer was still at large, while he, already a fugitive, now had the threat of a hemp four-in-hand hanging over his head.

Branch Isbell would know that he no more had a hand in Steve's death than he'd had in the holdup of his own stage; but back in Minas Prietas, Branch would be whipping up the pack after him. Now that his former partner had him branded incontrovertibly as an outlaw and a killer, there would be no further point in letting him run free of the law's long loop.

Steeldust was celebrating the arrival of high iron at its doorstep when Jim Borrum reached its dusty, churned-up main drag, a little before nine o'clock. Lights winked from the windows of every saloon and honkytonk; hitch racks were crowded, and railroad huskies mingled boisterously with cowpunchers, gamblers and homesteaders in the jammed bars and palaces of chance.

He tried the hotels first, the Indian Squaw and then the larger and gaudier High Iron House, but the names of Scotty Daw and Nopal Jackson were not on the registers. At nine-thirty, he dropped the grulla at the livery and began a canvas of the saloons and gambling halls.

He tried the smaller establishments first —Roulette Charlie's, the Muddy Boot, Doreen's Buscadero, and finally, the Big Spike. He met with no success. The mood of the town was one of wild, alcoholic festivity, and the few men to whom he dropped casual inquiries brushed off

his questions impatiently in their gayety.

Finally, at the Dude Palace, luck belatedly beckoned. The long, cherrywood bar was packed three deep as Jim Borrum entered, but it was not until he had walked through to the gambling layouts in the rear that he saw one of the men he was after, and came tensely to a halt.

Behind the green baized tops of the gaming paraphernalia was a long alcove where patrons were accorded the privilege of drinking and entertaining the dance hall girls. And there, seated at a table with one of the honkytonk women, was Nopal Jackson.

An icy prickling ran down Borum's neck. Nopal Jackson had shaved off his fiery red beard, and with his face smooth and his curly red hair trimmed and oiled, he had the appearance of a prosperous cowman or miner in new black California pants and a white broadcloth shirt trimmed with a neat black string tie.

As Borrum started into the alcove, now, Jackson made a sudden lunging reach across the table for the girl, and with a practised agility she drew back from him and came abruptly to her feet. The clatter and confusion in the room drowned out the sound of their voice, but Jim Borrum saw the girl give her companion a quick, flirting smile, then flash away into the crowd. Jackson sank back in his chair and with careful, drunken preoccupation began pouring himself another drink. Jim Borrum pushed through the crowd. He reached Jackson's table and stopped.

"Hello, Jackson," he said quietly. "Where's your friend Scotty—busy selling gold?"

Jackson's brick-colored head jerked up and his peering, shiny eyes fell on Jim Borrum in startled recognition. The man was half drunk, Borrum saw, but he showed his condition only superficially.

"What're you doin' in Steeldust?" Jackson asked without any special animosity. Then his myopically peering eyes thinned slyly. "You got your split, Borrum—what more d'you want?"

"I'd be interested to know why Branch Isbell framed me, for one thing."

Jackson's head lolled back and his sagging mouth loosed a genial guffaw. "You ain't too dumb to see that, are you, Borrum? Isbell's got the daunsy over that little Ware filly." He leered drunkenly. "What's'a matter—didn't Branch let you keep your gold?"

Deliberately, Jim Borrum pulled out the chair vacated by the girl and sat down. "Naturally he didn't."

Jackson smirked. "Girls take money, y'know, Borrum? Losha money." He refilled his glass from the bottle and downed the whiskey neat. "You're honesh." He leaned across the table with a smirk. "Isbell's a damn crook—crooked'r'n a ram's horn. Can't be honesh an' work with a crook." He shook his head solemnly. "Don't pay, Borrum. Don't pay 'tall." He waved an arm and grinned vaguely.

"Who killed Steve Ware, Jackson?"

Jackson seemed to have trouble focusing Borrum across the table top. "Shteve? Sh-Steve Ware? Who killed Ware? Nobody killed Ware. Ware'sh shmart boy. Got in a little jam. Needed money. Ansher to that, work for Bransh. Bransh got losh money. Losh an' losha money."

"Where's your friend Scotty?"

"Shcott—Shcotty?" Jackson grinned crookedly and waggled his finger. "You wisht you knew that, hey, Borrum? Thash secret. Thash ver' private shecret, m'fren'."

Borrum pushed back from the table and stood. "Well, I'll see you around, Jackson."

"Aw, siddown. Have drink. You have a drink, I'll have a drink. Jesh like ol' frensh, h'mmph? What shay?"

"Later, maybe." Borrum started away

from the table, but at the curtained entrance to the alcove, halted and glanced back. Nopal Jackson apparently had already forgotten his presence. He had poured another drink, the last one in the bottle, and was waggishly beckoning to another of the honkytonk girls.

Borrum turned and walked out of the saloon and headed downstreet, towards the livery, a plan shaping rapidly in his mind. Whether it would work would depend on the condition of Nopal Jackson when he finally left the Dude Palace.

He picked up his grulla at the livery, and rode thoughtfully back to the Dude Palace. There, dismounting, he hitched at the tie rail and went back inside.

Taking no interest in the bar, he went on to the alcove and stopped before the curtained entrance. Nopal Jackson was sagged back in his chair, watching the jostling, noisy crowd around him. A pretty, dark-haired girl flashed him a vacant smile passing his table, and abruptly he lurched out and made a grab for her. The girl screamed, and a house man came pushing through the throng.

He reached Jackson and pulled him out of his chair. His voice rammed at Jackson, cold, but leisurely. "Better take a walk, pardner. What you need is a little night air, to cool you off."

Jackson, surprisingly, made no protest. He started unsteadily through the alcove, and Borrum stepped back quickly into the card room. Jackson lurched past him, heading for the bat-wings. Borrum waited until the swing doors had flapped shut behind him, then hurried to the bar window and looked out. Jackson had unhitched his horse from the tie rack and was getting up clumsily into the saddle. Borrum went outside.

Jackson was swinging his big steeldust, and Borrum stood until he was half a block downstreet. Then he untied the grulla and stepped into the saddle.

He realized suddenly that he had no six-gun, but there was a Winchester chocked in his saddle boot, and that would have to do him, if it came to a showdown. His mouth drew down in a grim curve. If Nopal Jackson bell-weathered him on to where he and Scotty Daw had their hideout, there was a chance he might find the bullion. They might not have been able to dispose of it yet. And if he could recover the gold, and turn in Daw and Jackson to Sheriff Skene—

A FROWN creased his lean, sun-darkened jaw. Everything, now, depended on Jackson. If Jackson should suspect he was being followed, he might deliberately lead him off on a wrong scent. On the other hand, the big red-head might be just drunk enough, now, to have forgotten completely their meeting back at the Dude Palace. Certainly, hidden out here eighty miles from Minas Prietas, Daw and Jackson could have had nothing to do with the murder of Steve Ware.

They were well out of the town limits now, and keeping well behind the shadowy figure riding ahead of him, Jim Borrum thought again of Steve. Jackson had let one thing out of the bag: Steve, he had intimated strongly, had been in with Isbell on the bullion deal. Jim's jaw knotted. That was Jackson's story, and Jackson could be wrong. But it added up, nevertheless. If Steve had been losing at cards, and was in some kind of a tight with Chance Laverne over money, he might have been tempted to take the easy way out. Maybe he had caught on to something, and Isbell had promised him a cut of the money to keep his mouth shut. And Isbell would have liked having a club over the kid's head. It would have strengthened his position with Carla, in a way. At least, he would have had Steve on his side.

An hour passed. Then Jackson was

turning the steeldust, and they began circling down a series of sharp switchbacks, emerging finally on a grassy bottomland through which a creek rippled. Then Borrum saw a light, and as they moved slowly on, the looming shape of a low log ranchhouse, built in the form of a chunky L.

On a little knob of ground fifty yards from the cabin there was a parapet of low boulders, and there Borrum halted, while Jackson rode on towards a peeled-pole corral at the L-prong side of the house. He saw Jackson clumsily dismount and move at a lurching gait up to the house and go inside. Finally another light went on, and after waiting a cautious interval, Borrum stepped down from the grulla. He hobbled it, drew his rifle from the saddle scabbard, and started out from behind the boulders, moving with short, braced steps as a precaution against a rock slide down the steep shaley bank leading to the house.

At the bottom of the slide he halted behind a clump of tall buckbrush and studied the moonlit ranchhouse and outbuildings. The whole aspect of the place was one of weed-grown abandonment; there were only two horses in the dilapidated corral, Jackson and Daw's, evidently, and the bucket hanging from a frayed rope inside the well shack looked rotted and unused. The light in the front room of the house had gone out now, but in the foot of the L—a kitchen, apparently—a light glowed, and cautiously Borrum moved out from the thicket and stealthily approached it. Reaching it, he flattened himself against the rough pineslab siding and inched toward the window.

Suddenly he halted. An angry, high-pitched voice spurted from the open window, and Jim Borrum tensed and leaned forward.

"Sixty cents on the dollar!" Scotty Daw was complaining bitterly. "Who's Bronson think he's dealin' with—a couple of swivel dudes? The big boss said we shouldn't take a cent less than seventy-five, and that rides!"

Nopal Jackson grumbled sullenly, "Well, Bronson says he won't pay a cent over sixty. And he wants the bar tomorrow. I say we take it and fog out of here. It'll cut down the big auger's split, but—"

"The hell with the big auger!" Daw flared. "He got his bar, him and that damn' eyeballer who dealt us this hand. If they think they're gettin' another piece out of ours, they're loco!"

"We'll be loco," came Jackson's tired voice, "if we don't dig up that bar in the mornin', and get shut of it. Come on, I'm bushed. Let's hit the hay."

The light moved away then, and there was a sound of fading footfalls, and finally, silence.

Then minutes later, moving in a wide, circling upswing, Borrum made it back to the ridge where he had hobbled his horse. It suddenly struck him as strange, now, that neither Daw nor Jackson had mentioned Isbell by name. That had called him only the "big auger," and Daw had referred to "that damn eyeballer who dealt us this hand". In the lingo of the cattle country, an eyeballer was a meddler, but if Daw had meant the designation for Steve Ware, it didn't seem to fit, somehow. Or maybe it did, if Steve had found out about Isbell's plans for the robbery, and had tried to blackmail him for a share of the spoils, so he could pay off his debt to Chance Laverne. It was something he couldn't figure out.

It was getting colder, Borrum realized suddenly. He spread out the blanket and wrapped himself up in it, aware that he wasn't likely to do much sleeping anyway. The thick wool blanket began to warm his chilled bones, and he finally drifted off into fitful slumber.

HE AWOKE with a start in the chilly dawn. There was a little hardtack and jerky in his saddlebags and he munched a cold breakfast, then rolled a cigarete and lighted it, staring impatiently down at the house for some signs of activity. It was half an hour before Scotty Daw and Nopal Jackson came out, Daw carrying a saddlebag which flapped emptily against his bony knees, and Jackson a long, spear-pointed shovel.

Tensed, he watched them move up to the corral, halting at the third oakpost log from the gate, where Daw threw down the saddlebag and Jackson pressed the instep of his boot against the steel shaft of the spade and drove it into the gravelly dirt.

Picking up his Winchester, Borrum circled out from the rock in a wide detour, crossing the trail fifty yards from the house, then cutting into the high, thorny brush that led up to it on the side away from the corral. Reaching the far side of the house, he angled cautiously around to the rear and at last came to a halt behind a heap of rubbish and stacked boxes.

He gripped the rifle, his right forefinger curved around the trigger. Jackson had completed his digging, and was now bent down, lifting a heavy, dirt-caked object out of the hole he had dug. Jim Borrum waited until Daw had taken it and stuffed it into the saddlebag.

Then he leveled the rifle across the barricade of boxes and threw his voice out peremptorily.

"All right, you hombres! You're covered! Drop that saddlebag and start reaching!"

Nopal Jackson threw the shovel from him as if he had picked up the hot end of a branding iron, but as Scotty Daw dropped the saddlebag his right hand flicked towards his hip. A nickeled gun barrel flashed in his hand as he whirled, and Borrum cursed softly and squeezed the trigger of the Winchester he held.

The heavy-jacketed bullet smashed into Daw's chest and hurled him back, and Borrum stepped out guardedly from the stack of boxes just as Nopal Jackson danced away, drew, and fired twice.

The bullets whistled over Borrum's head and he ducked back quickly behind the boxes and again put the Winchester to his shoulder. He took a deliberate sight and fired. Abruptly, Jackson's left arm jerked back from his side like a pendulum slammed by a mallet.

Jackson yelled with a sudden bitter fury, "All right, fight then, damn it!" and started at a lumbering run towards the horses, his gun flashes leaping luridly in the gray dawn light.

Borrum thought, *All right, brother, if that's the way you want it. But I've got to have you alive, not dead.* And with a deliberate care, he leveled the rifle and fired at Jackson's clumsily scissoring legs.

The shock of the bullet unhinged Jackson's right knee and it bent, caving under him like a crazily wobbling wheel. He plunged down, and powdery corral dust spurted up, momentarily building a gray pall around him.

Borrum stepped watchfully out from behind the barricade, his finger ready at the trigger of the Winchester. But the big readhead was through for the day. He was levering himself painfully to a sitting posture as Borrum came up, pressing a hand to his lower right leg and staring up sullenly into Borrum's remote, gray eyes.

"You shouldn't mix pleasure with business, Jackson," Borrum said grimly. "You talk too much when you're roostered."

Jackson grunted, "Help me git a tourniquet on this damned leg. I'm bleedin' like a stuck pig."

"Hold your horses a minute," Borrum said. He took Jackson's gun and gun belt, then walked over to where Scotty Daw

lay, his hatless head cradled motionlessly against an outflung arm. Bending down, Borrum rolled him over. His long body was entirely slack; his bleak eyes stared up at the morning sky with a glassy vacancy.

Borrum turned and walked back to Jackson.

Jackson stared at him. "Dead?"

Borrum nodded. "Yeah. Now let's have a look at that leg."

Nopal Jackson's pale, pain-seamed face went stiff with shock as Borrum stooped over him and rolled up his pants' leg, exposing a raw, puffy wound.

"Got it in the arm, too," Jackson panted. "You—you're too good a shot, Borrum."

"Or not good enough," said Borrum grimly.

He set to, and in a few minutes had both wounds tightly tourniqueted and bound up. He helped Jackson get to his feet, then took his arm while Jackson hobbled stiffly across to his steeldust and mounted.

From the saddle, Jackson stared down at him. "Whyn't you let me ride out, Borrum? You got the bullion."

Borrum's gray eyes darkened. "You're worth more to me than the bullion, Jackson. We'll take a buckboard, from Toro. I'm saving you for Minas Prietas and Dan Skene."

Nopal Jackson laughed suddenly. "To Minas Prietas! Borrum, take my advice. Turn me loose now, and light a shuck while you got a chance. You may not get another."

Borrum took the bridle of the steeldust, leading it out of the corral. "I'll get my horse. We'll leave Daw's here, for now."

"So you ain't takin' my advice?"

"I'd be a fool to do that."

"You'll be a bigger fool if you don't."

Borrum's eyes pressed Jackson's with a quick, searching intensity. "What do you mean by that?"

Jackson answered sullenly, "The advice is free, Borrum. The information ain't."

Borrum shrugged. "Have it your way, but remember this: one funny move out of you on the way back, and I'll gun-whip you just like you did me, that day on the stage. I'm taking you in, Jackson. And it's up to you whether it'll be in a saddle —or across one!"

CHAPTER THREE

Sundown Smoke-out

IT WAS 6 P.M., the supper hour, when the buckboard carrying Jim Borrum and Nopal Jackson reached upper Main Street in Minas Prietas and started downstreet, an innocently inconspicuous vehicle among the other buckboards and springwagons pulled up in front of the saloons and mercantiles along the way. The team of matched bays in the traces plodded through the dust with their heads drooping, tired from the second day of their long journey from Toro Junction.

The men seated in the buckboard looked tired, too. Nopal Jackson sat with his shoulders slumped back against the seat cushion, his left arm in a sling, dourly puffing a cigarette. Jim Borrum's gunmetal gray eyes were laden with fatigue. But they were watchfully alert as he pulled in the buckboard finally at Chadwick's livery stable.

"All right," he snapped at Jackson, "shake a leg. We've got things to do."

He picked up the saddlebag containing the bar of bullion as Jackson gingerly put out his good left leg, and favoring his right, stepped painfully down to the board walk.

Borrum looped the reins around the whipstock, whistled up the kid who was on duty at the livery, then turned to his sullen prisoner. "Start moving," he ordered brusquely. "Upstreet."

With Jackson limping beside him, they walked north for two blocks, and then Borrum halted before the white picket fence that flanked the board walk in front of Carla Ware's.

He said, "In here," and saw the look of startled surprise mount in Jackson's eyes.

"But this ain't Doc Garrison's! I thought you said—"

Borrum cut him off curtly. "You'll get to Garrison's when I'm ready to take you there. March!"

Sullenly, Jackson swung in from the board walk and started up the gravel path to the house. Borrum, stepping carefully behind him, kept his hand close to the .45 Colt of Jackson's he had appropriated back at the abandoned ranch house.

"Rattle the knocker," ordered Borrum, and Jackson grudgingly obeyed.

For a moment, the banging of the knocker set up only empty echoes inside the house, then footsteps sounded from the rear, coming steadily louder. Shock held Jim Borrum rigid as the door opened and Carla Ware stood framed in the aperture.

Her thinned cheeks were a dull ivory color, and her usually clear, sparkling eyes were murky and red-rimmed. For an interval she stared at him with a blank look of surprise; then her lips trembled apart in a breathless little cry.

"Jim!"

Borrum felt a wrenching pain, felt her misery reach deeply into him and blend with his own in a kind of somber harmony.

He said, "Can we come in?"

She had her poise back now, and said simply: "I'm glad you're back, Jim. Come in, of course."

In the long, low-ceilinged living room, her glance swiveled curiously to Nopal Jackson before dropping back, expectantly, to Borrum.

"This is Nopal Jackson," he explained in answer to her unspoken question, "one of the men who held up the stage." His voice deadened flatly. "Isbell's other accomplice was Scotty Daw. Daw is dead."

"Oh!" She let out the word with a quick intake of breath, her eyes showing a startled expression momentarily, then clouding again suddenly. "Jim, you didn't learn anything about—about the killing of Steve?"

"Nothing definite, Carla—yet." His voice tightened. "They've tagged me with that, too, of course."

Carla Ware spoke tensely. "Yes. But I knew how close you were to Steve, Jim. I knew you couldn't have—" She broke off, and her voice lifted into bitter vehemence. "Oh, Jim, why did they have to do that to Steve? What had he done?"

"I'm not sure of that yet, Carla. But I think I'm on the right track—if you'll help with one more thing."

"I will Jim! You know that."

Borrum smiled at her gently. "I'd like to see you relax, for one thing. Then get your hat and coat. I want you to fetch Sheriff Skene here—without Branch knowing about it, if possible. I think Jackson may talk, to save his own hide."

He glanced at Nopal Jackson as he spoke, and saw the man's thick lips pull down sardonically.

Jackson growled, "You're building yourself up for a let-down, Borrum."

Carla Ware was looking worriedly back at Jim Borrum now; he met her eyes and with slow, deliberate movement, shook his head.

"It still stands, Carla—fetch Skene here. Jackson's not feeling too well. I think he's got a touch of hemp fever."

Carla Ware's voice hardened into quick resolve. "I told you I'd help, Jim. I'll get my coat."

After she had gone, Jim Borrum's glance swung grimly to Nopal Jackson. "So I'm building myself up for a let-down, am I?"

Jackson laughed flatly. "You're a pretty grissel-heeled hombre, Borrum, but I kind of admire you, at that. Only thing is, I'm just human enough to put myself ahead of you in this deal. You could still fog out of here, if you had a mind to. Was I you, I'd do it."

Borrum eyed him narrowly. "With or without the bullion?"

"Without it. You'd never get very far with it, Borrum."

"Why don't you give me the whole story, Jackson? It might go easier with you—especially since you've already admitted that Isbell framed me."

Jackson smirked. "Did I admit that? It ain't the testimony I'd give in court."

Borrum resisted an impulse to smash a fist into that wise, grinning mouth. He rapped out, "And that chunk of bullion you and Scotty planted on me back at the line shack was to be Isbell's split, wasn't it?"

"I ain't heard of it turning up yet," said Nopal Jackson dryly.

Jackson's carelessly dropped statement was like a bombshell suddenly exploding in Jim Borrum's brain. If Branch Isbell hadn't returned that bar of gold he'd recovered at the line shack, it could mean but one thing. And the implications of that thing were as incredible as they seemed inescapable.

Abruptly, Borrum paced to the window and drew back the shade. The street was empty. But if he was right, it was too late now. Carla was gone, and at any moment she might return. And he couldn't leave here now, unless he took Nopal Jackson with him. He frowned, turning slowly, and took makings from the pocket of his shirt. Preoccupied, he shaped up a cigarette and lighted it. What he'd thought was crazy, he decided. It couldn't be. And yet—

He studied Nopal Jackson through the smoke from his cigarette. In a way, it did add up. And if Skene came here with Branch Isbell—

He drew Jackson's .45 from his holster and carefully checked the load. Five beans in the wheel; just right. He chocked the gun back in its leather shield, shifting the belt slightly around his lean waistline. He glanced at Jackson. Jackson was eased back on the horsehair sofa, watching him with a bland, faintly amused expression.

With a sudden tense gesture, Jim Borrum dragged a straight-backed chair across to the window and sat down where he could look out and still keep an eye on his complacent prisoner. He finished his cigarette and immediately rolled another, conscious of an increasing nervous tension.

On the mantle above the fireplace a little china clock thrust its voice into the room with a sudden brittle ticking that snickered at the silence like rhythmically snipping scissors.

Jackson will never talk unless it comes to a show-down, Borrum thought, darkly. *And I can do nothing until I am sure I haven't made a fool's guess. But if Isbell does come. . . .*

OUTSIDE, in the deepening dusk, footsteps drummed hollowly on the board walk, grew louder suddenly. Borrum stiffened and flicked back the curtain. A half block down the street, a squat, paunchy figure was moving towards the house at a clumsily hurrying gait. He let the curtain fall back and swung his glance to Nopal Jackson.

"Here he comes," Borrum said. "And he's alone."

"Yeah?" Jackson said idly. "Who?"

"Skene," Borrum said.

Jackson shrugged. "So what?"

"Isbell's not with him," Borrum said carefully.

"All right, so Skene's alone. What's the difference?"

"You're a bad hand at poker, Jackson. You were bluffing before."

"Yeah? Better wait till I call you, Borrum. The game ain't over yet."

The footsteps were crunching up the graveled path to the house, and Borrum stood and went to the hall door, taking a position where he could be ready as the door came open, and still keep his view of Jackson, lolling on the sofa.

The door knocker clacked sharply, and Borrum flipped up the latch. He watched Dan Skene's heavy-jowled face as his pale, inert eyes ran straight at Jackson. They were narrowed and expressionless as Skene said, "So you got him."

"Also the rest of the bullion," Borrum said. He nodded to the saddlebag on the floor, beside the sofa. "You'll find Daw in McLavery's Undertaking Parlors in Toro Junction—if they haven't already put him in boothill."

Nopal Jackson remarked casually, "Any time you're ready, sheriff," and Borrum pinned him with a blunt glance. Jackson looked back at him innocently.

Borrum said to Skene, "I was framed. Isbell was the high muckamuck, Jackson and Daw helped him. I wouldn't have brought back the bullion if I'd been in on it, would I?"

Skene glanced at the saddlebag with a disinterested nod. "I see. Well, we'll wait for Miss Ware. She had another errand, but I'll want to question her a little further before we close this out." His pale eyes thinned, giving Borrum their full impact. "There's still the matter of Steve Ware's murder against you, Borrum. You were seen, you know, the night he was killed."

A warning tension ran through Borrum. Something was wrong here: Jackson's casual attitude, the sheriff's dilatory tactics. It was quite possible, of course, that Skene had seen him that night; but Skene hadn't said he had seen him fire the shot. So it might still be all right.

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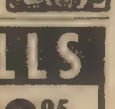

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Especially so, since Skene hadn't come here with Isbell. The damning fact remained, however: he had no way to prove that he hadn't killed Steve Ware. But if Skene wanted him for that, why didn't he come right out with it? Why didn't he take him in, along with Nopal Jackson?

"Maybe," suggested Jim Borrum flatly, "you could suggest what motive I would have had for killing Steve Ware? Everybody in town knew how close I was to that boy. I'd as lief have shot a kid brother."

His attention angrily focused on Skene's face, he didn't hear the door from the dining room swing open; he heard only the familiar voice, level and cool, measuring its words with a smooth urbanity: "Dan's just stalling, Jim, waiting for me. I advised you to high-tail it, remember? Now, I'm afraid, it's a little late for that."

Shock froze Jim Borrum as he snapped his gaze away from Skene and laid it on the blunt-snouted Walker pistol coming level with a leisurely deliberateness in the hand of Branch Isbell. And even in that flash of time, even as his elbows jabbed back, smashing the pane of glass in the window behind him, he thought: *It was Skene! Skene and Branch together!*

His gun arched up as he plunged backward through the smashed window, and then Branch Isbell was driving towards him across the room, firing with cool, unhurried judgment. He felt a hammer-like blow against his left shoulder as he triggered once, falling back through the broken window, and in the same moment he had a flashing glimpse of Isbell halting abruptly, hands clapped to his belly.

He landed heavily on the veranda, stunned momentarily; then out of the corners of his eyes he saw Skene's contorted, apoplectic face at the window, saw Skene push the snout of his Colt through the jagged fringes of glass just as he kicked back violently against the clap-

boards and turned a complete backward somersault.

Skene's gun threw a snaky gout of red at him, and then he was on his knees, his own gun still clamped in his hand. Pain jounced through his shoulder as he tried to raise it; he sucked in a sobbing breath as he saw Skene aim his pale, narrowed eyes down at him along the slick blue barrel. The left side of Skene's mouth was pulled into a savage grimace; Skene was prolonging his grim satisfaction in the moment, Skene wanted him to know he was going to die.

The shot that slammed came hollowly from inside the house, not from Skene's poised Colt. Abruptly, Skene's staring eyes spread into shocked rigidity; his finger uncurled idly from the trigger of his gun, and the gun banged down on the sill. The sheriff was clutching at the spears of broken glass, going down like a man lowering himself carefully from a high ladder.

Jim Borrum felt as if he was falling with Skene, falling into soft, billowy waves of darkness. One of the waves crested suddenly and hurled itself at him. He felt himself pitched violently forward.

He was lying on the sofa in the living room. The lamp on the gate-legged table next to it was lighted, and the light bloomed from it with a pale, warm radiance. It painted soft, flickering shadows across the face hovering above him, the sweet, sad face of Carla Ware. Then a faint smile eased some of the sadness from the face, and then there was a voice, gentle as a caress, dropping its quiet words.

"Doctor Garrison will be here in a few minutes," Carla Ware said. "I've stopped the bleeding. Feel better now?"

A slow grin twisted Jim Borrum's mouth. "Now I do. But what happened here, anyway? I heard that shot, and—"

He saw the other face then, a lean, knotted jaw, cool, powder-colored eyes

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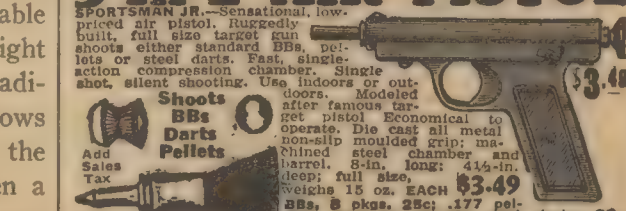

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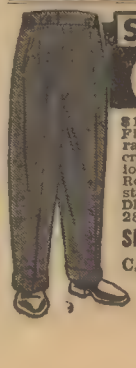

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staring down at him with a faintly quizzical expression.

Carla said, "This is Dave Howell, Jim, United States Deputy Marshal. I was just coming out of Skene's office when I saw Pop Renssler beckoning to me from across the street. He saw Skene shoot Steve, but he was afraid to say anything. Then he saw you coming into town with Jackson, and decided he could talk. After that, I knew what would happen if Skene went to the house, so I ran on to the hotel and got Mr. Howell. We got here as fast as we could."

"Almost not fast enough," said Dave Howell grimly.

"But Steve," Jim Borrum murmured. "Did Pop know—"

"Steve overheard Skene and Isbell talking in the stage office, after the holdup. He notified the Minas Prietas people, and they called in Mr. Howell. But apparently Skene found out that Steve knew something. So he—he—"

Dave Howell's voice impinged on the uneasy silence. "Well, I guess this washes it up. The Minas Prietas Company put up a five thousand dollar reward for the recovery of the bullion. One chunk's here, and I'm pretty certain we'll find the other in Skene's safe. The reward belongs to you, Borrum."

He swung around abruptly. Nopal Jackson still sat, sullenly silent, on the sofa, his wrists joined with steel cuffs.

Howell snapped, "Come on, Jackson."

Jim Borrum looked up at Carla Ware as the footsteps faded on the veranda steps. "Well, it seems like I'm going to need another partner, Carla." Against the pain throbbing through his bandaged shoulder, he grinned at her twistedly. "How would you like going into the staging business?"

"Oh, Jim!" said Carla Ware smiling softly. "Staging's a job for a man. I'm thinking of becoming a housewife!"

(Continued from page 98)

desperado band. Twice sentenced to death, Bob Ford was badly shaken. He claimed to have received "only a few hundred dollars" of the rewards offered. It seems likely that the expense of lawyers to defend him and Liddil from the Hite murder charge reduced his take for killing Jesse James.

Bob Ford, in the clear, became a sensation, telling his story. After a time he became an actor in a play about border outlaws. Across the Western scene, wherever troubadors sang the national ballads was heard;

It was on Saturday night
Jesse was at home,
Talking to his family brave;
Robert Ford came along,
Like a thief in the night,
And laid poor Jesse in his grave.

This song was made
By Billy Gashade,
As soon as the news did arrive;
He said there was no man
With the law in his hand,
Who could take Jesse James alive!

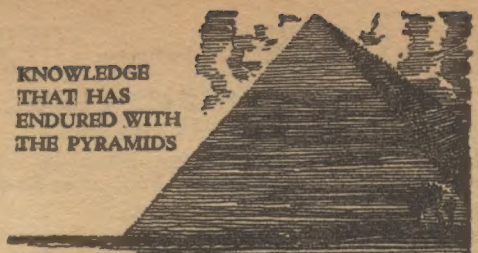
With Jesse James and the band gone Frank was just another fugitive. He decided to surrender, but not to any mere sheriff, or prosecutor, or detectives.

Through influential politicians, Frank James negotiated his surrender. On October 5, 1882, Frank James arrived in Jefferson City, Missouri, climbed the steps and stalked with stern dignity to the office of Governor Thomas T. Crittendon. Where the governor waited.

The desperado gracefully unbuckled his belt with its two short gun scabbards and with a gesture of proud humility handed over the revolver harness.

Frank James had to be tried to satisfy public opinion; robbery was chosen as the charge, and in due course it was proved that Frank James hadn't even been present at the particular train robbery, so he was acquitted.

(To be continued)



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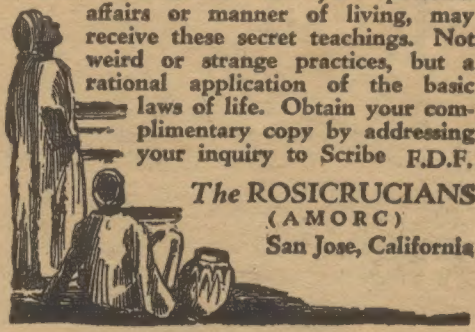

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(Continued from page 6)

torneys. The code consisted mainly of two unwritten statutes—hanging, and thirty-nine stripes, "well laid on." As in vigilance committees the court was orderly and the rules were simple.

An amusing incident is related of the trial of a murderer at Hangtown (later renamed Placerville) in the northern part of the state. The fellow had robbed a miner, then killed him, and buried the body in his own tent.

In this case the lawyer had ranted for an hour, when a quietus was put upon him. The jury went out, one of them carrying a friendly jug. They sat under a large liveoak, and after a nip all around began to discuss the affair. Another drink around, and then another, and the court became restive. They should have decided such a simple case in two hours.

So the judge told the murderer to pray—if he knew how.

Finally the twelve men filed in and reported, "Guilty as charged!"

"Gentlemen of the jury, we are powerfully glad that your verdict agrees with our decision, for we've done hung the damned murderer!" exclaimed the judge, pointing to a swaying form on a nearby limb as Exhibit A.

The importance of ropes in administering frontier justice is well illustrated by an occurrence in New Mexico in 1847. On January 19th of that year Governor Charles Bent went under in the massacre at Taos. Feeling ran high and it was not long before the murderers —those who had not been slain—were caught.

A trial was held in San Fernandez. Five were convicted for murder, one for treason. They were sentenced to be hung, and on May 9, 1847, the six men were marched to the gallows that had been erected one hundred and fifty yards from the prison.

No ropes had been provided by the State, however, so the sheriff borrowed some rawhide reatas and hempen picket ropes from friends and government teamsters. These were examined amid much discussion, and since the hemp ropes were very stiff, John L. Hatcher, a mountain man, fingered the nooses and called out:

"Hey, Met, these reatas are mighty stiff and won't fit."

"I've got somethin' to make 'em fit—good ointment," returned Sheriff Metcalf. "It don't smell very sweet, but it's good enough for these greasers. Freeze into it, boys." He produced a *real's* worth of Mexican soft soap. "This'll make 'em slip easy—a long ways too easy for 'em, I 'spect."

So the "ointment" was rubbed into the hard ropes, and the frugal sheriff later put in his bill of expenses for the execution on which this item appeared:

"To soft soap for greasing nooses—twelve cents."

Later, when the bodies were being cut down, one of the teamsters objected to the ropes being cut. So they were spared, and there was enough soap on them to provide him with a dozen good washings, which he badly needed.

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